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# **The Story of Anna P**

**As Told by Herself**

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## ABSTRACT

This is a book about the fragility of memory and identity, and the nature of time.

It has three parts reflecting the past, present and future of a woman, Anna P, who lives on an island off the coast of Italy but can no longer remember how she got there. She comes from South Africa but has almost no memories of the place or people there, and no attachment to them. The only person she has any relationship with is a sex worker whom she pays by the hour. Her life is meaningless. She has abusive encounters with unknown men, clearly repetitions of traumatic events in the past, during which she dissociates. It is not clear whether she occasionally kills these men or not.

It is only when she begins to connect emotionally with a slightly retarded child, and her self begins to coagulate around a tiny centre core of meaning, that she finds some value in herself, some place which she will not allow to be abused. Through connection with another person, she comes into an ethical relationship with the world.

The book was inspired by a statement in *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog, who writes: 'Memory is identity'. This began a train of questions about the nature of memory and identity: Who are we if we lose our memories? What does it mean to have no identity? What happens if memory is tampered with? Identity then becomes very fragile. And if we have no identity, no sense of ourselves, how can we make any ethical choices? It felt as if this was an important question to be asking as a South African writer.

We live in an age that is for the most part trying to forget its past, to cancel out the atrocities, to push them out of consciousness. What does this do for us? What darkness, what shadows are lurking under the surface? Who are we? What dangers does this represent? How can we even begin to hope for anything more than amorality? By Freud's understanding, we will keep repeating the past in the present until we bring it to consciousness.

I decided it would be interesting to write about someone who suffers from a dissociative disorder and can no longer remember all her past or her present actions. Through her behaviour she will keep repeating the traumas of the past but will not be able to give them any meaning.

I have drawn in part on the work of the confessional writers, from Augustine to Vico, Rousseau, Beckett and Jung, and in part on Freud and Breuer's seminal case of Anna O. It is a psychoanalytic reading of a life - trying to understand the past through the way a character repeats in the present, in symbolic form, what formed her in the past. It's what an analyst would interpret about the past in a patient's projections and transferences in the consulting room, when a patient cannot or will not talk about the specific events.

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Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.

TS Eliot Burnt Norton

University of Cape Town

## PREFACE

I am not sure any more how I ended up here on the island. I think I came to see the ruins and forgot to go back. The local school needed an English teacher and I was asked to stand in until the Ministry in Rome appointed someone.

But that was twenty years ago.

I have lived all these years in uncertainty, knowing only that any day the real teacher may arrive. In the meantime a cheque has been deposited into my account each month. It is not much, but then I haven't had many needs except for paper and ink to carry on this endless dialogue with myself.

The islanders call me *l'Inglese*, the English woman, although I have not spent more than a few months in England in my whole life. They are kind enough to me, but I am aware that they speak more slowly to me than they do amongst themselves, as if I were a slightly retarded child. I know it is out of kindness that they do it, yet I have wished at times that they wouldn't and that I could just be one of them.

I suspect that they are puzzled by me, that implicit in the name *l'Inglese* is a sense also of *la Pazza*, the mad woman, although they would never call me that to my face. I think I do not make much sense to them, simple as they are, but then perhaps I do not make much sense to myself either. I am always here like them, I get up every day at the same time, breathe the same air, eat the same food, yet I have no common purpose with them. I have not tried to explain where I come from, and I think they would not understand if I did. To them Africa is what you can see across the straits on a clear day. It doesn't connect with an eccentric Englishwoman in any way. To their knowledge I have no past – or family either. I have sometimes wondered what the islanders would do if I died, as at some point I suppose I must.

I am always filled with a yearning for something I can't put my finger on or understand. At times the pain is so great that I wish I were a man and could pay a woman to hold me for a few hours, to make it pass. My body longs to be held and comforted, to know the warmth and softness of touch. And after a while I began to realise that it doesn't make much difference whether one is a man or a woman.

I have on occasion, after payday at the end of the month, left the island and, in the anonymous back streets of a big city by night, found the courage to approach a woman and offer her money to spend the night with me. It is not about sex, you understand, although of course there is that too. But it is when the pain of being alone grows so great that it threatens to overwhelm me. We rent for the night, for the space of a few hours, a small room in a nearby *pensione* under the cynical scrutiny of the concierge and climb the dusty stairs to the small room. A high bed that must have belonged to someone's grandmother, a washbasin and bidet, a crucifix on the wall – the bare essentials for living and dying. From the walls come the groans and sighs of others like me who find the indifference of the universe too much to bear, who are trying to find temporary respite. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it is just about the bodily itch?

I have found a woman who suits my needs well enough. Sabrina she calls herself, although I am sure that is not her real name. The transaction is quick and shameful and money changes hands – the price includes the room. She shows no interest in me, asks no questions. We slip naked between the sheets in the light that filters through the shutters from the streetlamps. The understanding is clear. She is willing to share her body with me for a few hours, that is all. At first she felt she must perform, give me my money's worth. Now she just holds me close. Sometimes there is release. Sometimes just the holding is enough.

Sometimes when it is over I feel her eyes on me in the mirror as she tidies her hair and prepares to leave, but she never tries to breach the distance now that our bodies have separated. She works well on the level of bodies. Knows how to satisfy their longings.

I catch the first ferry back to the island in the early light of morning, bundled up against the cold and damp. I watch the gulls swoop and dive in our wake, the first rays of sunlight reflecting off their wings as they rise, while we below are still caught in darkness and the mainland slips slowly off the horizon. I go straight from the harbour to school.

The island, you ask? Well, it's not much more than an extinct volcanic outcrop of rocks, with a tiny circular harbour nestled into its water-filled crater. The little village springs up around its sides. The roads are too narrow for even a *Cinquecento* to pass so you have to walk or take a *Vespa* to travel around. There is never enough water here. We collect and store rain water in winter, but the summers are long and hot and there is never enough. Supplies have to be brought over by ferry in huge containers from the mainland.



There are two or three peaks which are not very high, but beneath the cliffs are deep half-submerged caves which have been hollowed out and shaped over thousands of years by the succeeding inhabitants of the island. The Romans bred moray eels in them. Sometimes they would throw a slave into the water for the entertainment of their guests, watch his flesh being torn from his limbs, the white bones exposed by the sharp teeth.

Pontius Pilate was born here, they say, the Roman governor who washed his hands of the whole affair with the troublesome Jew. He drowned himself in a river afterwards. And Giulia Livilla, sister of the emperor Caligula, died here in exile, alone, of hunger. I wonder about her sometimes, what she thought as she sat here at her window looking out across the waves towards Rome, when she realised that there was no longer any hope of return. Or did she keep on hoping until the very end?

Even Mussolini was exiled here in 1943 until Hitler's troops rescued him and set him up as a puppet dictator in Salò. I have seen a copy of his ration card. So much bread, so much sugar, so much butter each day, the little things of our lives. Did he have forebodings of his end a short time later? They hanged his body by the feet in *Piazzale Loreto*, you know, like Judas, upside-down. And the people of Milan spat on his body and howled out their rage. One of the shadier incidents of the war. The heavy body hung there in the spring breeze. I have seen the documentary, the flickering images on the screen, the people of Milan with fierce faces, hollow cheeks and sunken eyes etched with hunger, pain and fear from years of war.

## BOOK 1

### The Present of Time Past

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.  
VLADMIR: They all speak at once.  
ESTRAGON: Each one to itself ...  
VLADIMIR: What do they say?  
ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.  
VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.  
ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

Waiting for Godot - Samuel Beckett

He puts the tape recorder onto the table between them and adjusts his position, making himself comfortable. He lights a cigarette. She sees the tip glow in the late afternoon dusk and light up the contours of his nose and mouth. He presses the record button. A thrush chucks in the courtyard beyond the barred window and rustles in the undergrowth. He opens his hands inviting her to start.

She doesn't react. She looks at him for a moment, then drops her eyes to her lap, watches her finger worrying a loose thread on her jeans. It moves backwards and forwards, flattening the thread one way and then the other, on and on. Now that the time has finally come, she can't think of anything to say. She looks up and sees his eyes watching her carefully, waiting for her to talk. She searches for words and clears her throat. Her voice comes out husky and low.

- I don't know where to begin.

He nods but doesn't say anything.

Her eyes flick around the room avoiding his, trying to find a point of entry into her thoughts. It all feels so confused. There are these things that happened, but she doesn't know if they have any meaning, if they would explain anything.

He watches her carefully, waiting.

She feels suddenly very tired. There's all this big mess of memories. Just a huge jumble. So many things that have happened. She's not even sure whether they happened to her at all. Maybe they happened to someone else, or she saw them in a film, or she dreamt them - it's difficult to distinguish. The truth might be completely different.

He waits.

Her thoughts run on. There is so much that she doesn't remember. That's got lost in time, with the hospitals, and the shock treatment and with everything that happened afterwards.

He clears his throat.

- *Comincia con quello che si ricorda.* Just start with what you can remember. *Mi dica come mai e' qui.* Tell me how you came to be here.

His voice is gentle and kind. For some reason she feels she can trust him. She wants to tell him everything. Perhaps he will understand.

- *Puo' dirmi tutto.* Tell me everything. From the beginning.

She feels herself slipping back into her mind, the room about her fading into shadow. The beginning? Her earliest memory? She must have been just a few months old. Lying naked in dappled sunlight on a blanket, the shifting textures on her skin - warm and cool, soft and hard.

She has a sudden doubt – didn't she read this in a book somewhere? She hesitates, looks at him feeling foolish, glad she is not speaking her thoughts aloud.

She remembers calling her mother, "mom-mee, mom-mee". And her father calling back, "moo cow", and laughing. And her mother wasn't there.

She remembers walking into the sea holding her mother's hand, her arm stretched up as far as it could go to reach her fingers, and then she lost hold as a wave knocked her over into a long hollow watery tunnel that stretched away forever and forever and then caught her up and spun her round and round until she knew she was drowning.

She remembers her granny saying: "Sing for me, Anna, sing". She stood in the middle of the carpet and smiled. She took hold of the edges of her skirt and held them out to the sides and mimed the words. I'm a little teapot short and stout. Here is my handle, here is my spout, when the water boils I begin to shout, lift me up and pour me out.

She looks at him carefully. What sense do these fragments make? None. He sees her watching him and tries again.

- *Deve cercare di parlare.* You must try to talk. Tell me whatever seems important to you. *Non si preoccupi di me.*

She feels confused. She doesn't know. Did she begin there, did this story begin there, with those early memories? Or does she need to go further back and tell him about her parents and grandparents and how they came to be living there and stuff like that?

He opens his hands again.

- *Le faccio delle domande.* Maybe it is easier if I ask you some questions and you answer?

She nods.

- *Allora, cominciamo dal piu' semplice. Come si chiama?*

- My name is Anna. Anna P.

- *Mi puo' dire dove e' cresciuta.* Where did you grow up?

She leans forward and looks at him for a moment struggling to speak.

- Cape Town. *Sudafrica.*

Her voice sounds harsh and loud to her ears and she falls silent again.

A picture forms in her mind of the small house on the sandy corner plot where she grew up. She remembers the almond tree and the scruffy sun-scorched lawn that always had devil thorns in the same place each year. She is looking down on it from the roof of the garage, where she has climbed to play with her doll. She can see the kitchen door standing open and the brown paper wrapped parcel bleeding dark blood that the butcher's boy has left on the kitchen table.

She looks at him quickly, sees him watching her and drops her eyes.

- Can you remember anything about it? *Ha dei ricordi?*

She leans forward and looks at him for a moment and then starts to talk, slowly, in a low voice.

- I remember we kept chickens. I used to sing to them.

- Mmm.

- I remember my brothers used to go out into the veld and shoot birds with their pellet guns. I remember one day they shot a hawk. My father nailed it to the fence, wings outspread, and left it there until it rotted away.

She stops.

- I remember lying in bed at night waiting for my mother to come and kiss me goodnight. I couldn't fall asleep until she did.

Images of one night suddenly flood through her. She remembers the light from the passage filtering through the half-open door and falling onto her desk piled high with books

and her school uniform ready for the morning. She remembers hearing her pet hamsters rustling around in the sawdust in the bottom of their cage.

- Mom, she called.

She remembers hearing the radio in the lounge at the far end of the house. The volume was louder than usual and she could hear the words clearly. A man was speaking with an American accent. His voice, flat and metallic, crackled as if it was coming from a long way away. It was a voice she recognised from the newsreels at the bioscope, President Kennedy. He seemed to be speaking with urgency. She caught the odd word here and there: missile, provocative, threat to peace, nuclear war.

- Mommy, she called again. No movement. The voice continued. The words ran over her meaninglessly, like water in a stream:

*....it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet ....*

The voice droned on and on. She remembers thinking how much grown-ups talk.

- Mom, she called again.

*....Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right – not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom, here in this hemisphere and, we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved. Thank you and goodnight.*

She heard the voice crackle a last time and then fade. Silence.

- Mommee! she shouted.

This time something stirred. She heard her mother's steps navigate through the lounge and along the corridor. Her footsteps sounded different from usual on the bare wooden floor. Usually crisp and determined, there was something tired and uncertain about them tonight. She waited wide-eyed in the dark. Her mother sat heavily on the side of the bed. She bent down and stroked the child's hair back from her forehead. She remembers it felt clammy under her cool fingers.

- You must pray very hard tonight, she said. She sighed. Her voice dropped.

- Maybe this will be the beginning of the next war.

She remembers her mother was silent for a minute.

- It could be the end of the world.

He clears his throat and raises his eyebrows. She looks at him and then away.

- She said it just like that, I remember, just like that. Then she said goodnight, sleep tight, don't let the fleas bite, if they do, pinch them tight. Our bedtime ritual. But that night it had lost its soothing power.

- Then she told me to say my prayers.

- I remember how I turned obediently onto my back as I had been taught since as long as I could remember. I folded my hands in front of me and closed my eyes:

In this little bed I lie  
Heavenly Father hear my cry  
Lord protect me through the night  
Keep me safe till morning light.

She remembers hearing rain spattering on the window.

Dear God, bless Mommy and Daddy  
And the boys,  
And God bless me.

Dear God, please make the war go away.

- I didn't know how to pray harder than that.

She remembers picturing the ships, a line of grey warships with grey missiles loaded on the decks pointing at the sky, travelling ominously in convoy across a steel-grey sea, like she had seen in the black and white documentaries of the war. She could almost hear the slow dramatic music accompanying their progress, and the clipped accent of the announcer.

- I tried again.

- "Please Lord, make the war go away. Please make it stop. Please help President Kennedy."

- The prayer was still open, I knew, because I hadn't said amen yet. I lay stiffly between the sheets, my hands still clasped in front of me.

- "Please God, don't let Mommy die".

- "Make the war go away", I tried again.

She remembers hearing the wind whip the poplar trees along the back fence to and fro, tearing at the branches. Lightning flickered, followed almost at once by crashes of thunder. Rain flung itself in wave after wave at the house.

And still she prayed.

She looks up. In the gloom she can barely see his outline.

- You know, I don't know how to tell you about this. But it was then that I heard the voice for the first time. It was deep and gentle and kind and filled the room although I know no-one was there apart from me. The voice was all around me and inside me.

She pauses. What really happened? Did she really hear a voice? Wasn't that from Jean Anouilh's *l'Alouette*?

He looks at her quizzically. She decides not to share this layer of thought with him. She continues.

- Well, there was this voice that told me it had heard my prayer and that it would take care of everything.

He uncrosses his legs. Ah, that got a reaction out of him.

- *Una voce?*

She doesn't reply, waiting for him to show himself.

- Where did the voice come from?

Ah, the medical model, she thinks. But the question intrigues her and she finds herself answering in spite of herself.

- I don't know. It was just there. Like a light in the shadows.

- *E cosa diceva?*

- It said, "Do not worry child. I have heard your prayer". It told me to go to sleep, that the angels would look after me and protect me through the night. It told me to be a good child.

It told me I could sleep now.

- "Amen", I whispered. And at last I fell asleep.

He coughs loudly in the dark. He picks up the tape recorder and checks that it is recording, and then puts it back onto the table.

- *Andiamo avanti.*

She remembers how a few days later her mother told her that the Soviet ships had turned back and the crisis had been averted. Perhaps her mother wondered for a moment at the hectic flush on the child's face, and then was distracted.

- But I knew for certain that I had saved the world. God was listening to me and would answer my prayers.

He chuckles softly in the dark.

- *Grazie*. Thank you for saving us.

She remembers walking around in a daze for a few days afterwards, going to school, playing, doing her homework, and saying her prayers. But it felt as if everything was suspended. There was a kind of unreality about everything. Life seemed to carry on as usual, but it was as if her gaze was fixed on a single spot – she was aware of the bustle and movement about her, but it was all out of focus, at a great distance. Like watching ants milling about on the ground, the movements senseless, soundless, irrelevant. She forced herself to do all the usual things, smiled when she was expected to smile, but when she was in bed at night she couldn't sleep. Something had changed in her universe.

She breathes deeply and looks at him.

- Slowly I grew used to the idea. It began to feel natural. It was like having a magic lamp to rub. It made me feel very special.

She stops talking. From outside the windows she can hear the sound of traffic and the uneven dripping of rain in the courtyard. She hears him sigh, and sees him raise his hand to his face. He inhales and then she sees the tip of his cigarette fragment into glowing sparks as he stubs it out in the ashtray on the table and clears his throat.

- *Continua*.

She doesn't know why she is telling him this silly story. Trying to find a connection, a cause, meaning she supposes. Her busy brain trying to sort out the isolated events into cause and effect. If this, then that. Perhaps there is no connection, no meaning? Life is just a series of haphazard events, and then you die? And anyway, this all happened so long ago, and so many children think like this, they like to believe that they have magic powers to make things happen so that they are not totally victims of circumstance. We all want to take charge of our own destinies at some point. The trouble is that then you become responsible for the outcome.

- *L'ha usato poi, il potere?*

- Well, yes.

- I started at home. With my father.

She sighs and hesitates. Here it comes. It's difficult for her to talk about her father even today.

- I remember a dream I often had when I was about five which used to wake me in terror  
- a scary, sweaty dream that stayed with me for days, especially when I went to the park.



He picks up a pen and paper to note down the details of the dream and waits for her to start. She ignores him.

- We often used to play in the park, full of big trees and secret places and a pond covered with lotus flowers. But swirling beneath the surface the pond was treacherous, deep with unknown currents.

- I remember my mother warned me: "Don't go near the water, you might slip and the current will pull you down!"

- I remember wondering what a current was. And suddenly I knew. It was a giant octopus with long tentacles that would grab me and pull me down, down, into the deep darkness. No air, no breath, no life, just a cold watery grave, with my hair and eyes and mouth and throat and stomach all awash. Now when I went there with my brothers I lay on the smooth lawn at some distance from the pond and watched it. I was sure that if I watched carefully enough, sooner or later I would see the current, catch a flash of a tentacle. Then my mother would believe me, instead of telling me to stop being a booby.

- "Booby, booby", cried the children.

From time to time the water rippled as if something was moving in the depths. But then it passed and the pond settled and the sun shone on the undisturbed surface again.

She looks at him for a moment, hesitating, not sure whether to tell him about it.

- There was another dream. But this one is more difficult to tell you about.

- Mmm?

The bed, warm and big and comforting. Her father inviting her in to snuggle and chat on a Sunday morning. Everyone else at Sunday school. Just the two of them there on a sleepy, drowsy morning. Her father never wore pyjamas. He always walked around with the grey hair on his chest bristling and what he called his 'thing' dangling below his belly. What a terrible expression, she thinks. And now cuddled in bed with him, with the morning sun shining through the curtains, dappling light onto the surface of the bed. A strong smell of beer and naked male flesh.

- I remember how he took my hand and ran it through the grizzled hair on his chest as he told me about the war, behind the lines in Libya. He had a lot of medals that he used to show me when he was in a good mood. I remember wondering what the lines were. Washing lines? He told me about the heat in the desert, when his testicles stuck to his leg. Testicles? Tentacles?

She stops, feeling embarrassed. Wonders whether this is not too intimate, wonders what he is thinking, then decides that she will have to finish now that she's got this far.

-And he took my hand down, so that I could feel where they got stuck. There! And there!

She remembers how then he put her hand on his tentacle and moved it up and down.

Was this a current? It felt like a tentacle but he called it his thing.

She remembers his question, "Do you like this, sweetheart?"

And she remembers how she felt frozen, unable to say a word.

She remembers how he answered for her. "I know you love it. You do, don't you? Answer me!"

- "Yes, Daddy."

How could she say no? She wanted to run away to a safe distance where she could just watch for the ripples and maybe tell her Mom if she saw it again.

She remembers his hand straying into her pyjamas.

- "Why don't you take them off? It's much nicer without them."

She took them off.

His hand slid down between her thighs. Touching her in those funny places. Pressing, fluttering, smoothing. And his hands pushing and pulling her down under the blankets, into the dark, and then the tentacle caught her and was pulling her down, and she couldn't breathe and she felt as if she was drowning, all awash, her mouth, her stomach, her hair.

And suddenly it was over, and everyone was home and the Sunday fell back into its usual pattern of Sunday roast with roast potatoes and bullet peas to balance on the back of your fork, and pudding with custard, and then a long ramble in the bush with Mom and the boys. She held her mother's hand all the way, walking just one step behind her.

She looks at him.

- They used to call me Mummy's Little Shadow.

She falls silent. Embarrassed. Relieved.

He moves in his seat.

- *Un momento*, he says. *Devo cambiare il nastro*. He leans forward and switches on a small table lamp and light floods into the dark room. She closes her eyes to adjust, then opens them and looks at him to see what he is thinking. But he seems focused on what he is doing. She waits, glad of the interruption, while he removes the tape from the recorder and replaces it with a new one. At last he is ready. He raises his eyes and gives her a long

searching look. He coughs and pulls out a handkerchief and blows his nose, his eyes never leaving her face.

- *Procedi*, he says. *Continua*.

Imperceptibly he has started to use the familiar form, *tu*.

He looks at her expectantly.

- Won't you switch off the light again?

He turns and switches it off and the room falls again into semi-darkness, just the glow from the lamp in the courtyard making their outlines visible.

She starts talking.

- I remember the first time I tried it out. The power, I mean.

It started one evening at home about two months later. She had come home from school thinking the house would be empty as usual and that she would have to make herself some lunch and then do her homework. She didn't notice her father's car parked outside under the tree. He had decided on an impulse to take them to the beach.

Why he had decided this she never knew; he hadn't been to the beach since she was very small. But this day he was determined. She and her brothers were reluctant to go anywhere with him. He sensed this and grew angry.

- "Will you bloody kids get into that bloody car at once?"

How do you say no? They eventually dragged themselves outside to where he stood waiting. What he had wanted to be a happy, fun-filled outing was already turning sour. As usual, she remembers, his huge black vintage car wouldn't start. He turned the key in the ignition time after time, pressing the starter, but the car just kept baulking at his efforts, refusing to catch. Secretly they began to hope there would be a reprieve.

- "Get out and push!"

So they all got out and pushed the car down the hill with him trying all the time to start it. Suddenly, about a mile down the road, where the road had already turned to a gravel track rough under their bare feet, with proteas high on each side and the smell of *buchu* strong in their nostrils, the car shuddered into life with a roar. He put his foot on the accelerator to warm up the motor as fast as possible, blasting the wilderness with black smoke and fumes. They all jumped in, he turned the car on the track with difficulty, and then roared back into the village and on over the hills covered with rows and rows of young green wheat and then down through the rough coastal scrub to the beach.

She remembers it was late afternoon by the time they arrived. A few fishermen stood on the long white beach casting their lines out into the surf. Even though it was the middle of winter and the shadows were long, the sun was warm on their bare legs and arms. The boys dived into the icy water and swam briskly for a few minutes, then came out puffing and covered in goose bumps. The light caught the drops of water in their hair and lit up their faces like haloes. They ran up and down the beach to get dry. They started quarrelling as usual, their natural aggression and frustration most easily unleashed on each other rather than at the source.

He stayed near the car, taking slugs from a plain medicine bottle filled with a transparent liquid. After a while he set off, rather unsteadily now, towards the water's edge, where he had noticed some fishermen pulling in a catch.

- "What did you get?" he asked them, slurring slightly.
- "*Dis 'n haai.*" They pointed at the rough grey shark still wriggling on the sand.
- "Hey kids, come here. Come and look at this."

Their hearts dropped but they went and looked. They knew it was best not to defy him in public.

- "It'll be bloody funny to have a shark in our fishpond, hey? Let's take it home. Can you imagine what the cat will do when it tries to drink and sees a fin coming towards it in the water. It'll be bloody funny."

She stops and looks at him.

- I remember how embarrassed we were, humiliated at being part of him, of his absurd ideas, of his slurred speech. His shame was our shame. We wished we could disappear.

Her thoughts slip back again into the past.

He negotiated a price and they lugged the still squirming creature back to the car. By this time he was staggering slightly.

"Who wants to drive?" He pointed at her fourteen year old brother. "You drive." David was small for his age and could barely see over the dashboard or reach the pedals with his feet. From where she stood outside the car, she remembers, it looked as if no-one was driving.

She feels her stomach turning even as she remembers this. She pulls the cushion out from behind her back and snuggles it against her body. Perhaps she should just leave the past to itself. What good will it do to talk about it. Perhaps some skeletons should be left to

turn to dust undisturbed.

But the memory keeps coming.

They all piled in, their father in the back. He was drinking steadily and openly now, and was barely coherent. No-one said a word. It was growing dark quickly, and her legs had turned mottled with the cold. Blue and pink and white. Sand scratched her thighs where they rubbed against the leather seat. She felt a tight bitter anger in her chest.

Sitting as tall as he could, David drove slowly down between the dunes and along the shady avenue of blue-gum trees. The cold dusty scent of eucalyptus filled the car. He didn't notice the police car parked by the side of the road in the long shadow of the trees. Only when he heard the siren behind him did he turn his head and see the policeman signalling him to stop.

- "Dad, it's the cops!"

- "Oh Christ! Quick, hide the liquor!"

They pushed the brown medicine bottles under the seat and sat paralysed, waiting. An overweight policeman sauntered up to the door of the car.

- "License please, *lisensie asseblief*."

She remembers how her father opened the door on the far side, tripped and fell out onto the ground. He pushed himself to his knees and then unsteadily to his feet. He held onto the door of the car for balance.

- "Listen here, officer, my son's just having a driving lesson."

The policeman studied him, and then inspected each of the children in turn. No-one said a word.

- "*Meneer*, you are drunk. Come with me. Don't you kids move!"

She remembers that they sat in the dark vehicle and waited. They isolated themselves within themselves and didn't see their father being led away. After what seemed like a very long time of cold and dark, the policeman returned and pointed at David.

- "You, *seuntjie*, come with me."

A different policeman got into the car without saying a word and drove the two remaining children over the dark hills to home. The car pulled up at last outside the house and they slipped out while the policeman spoke to their mother in a low serious voice.

She stops talking and thinks. Like on so many other occasions she never knew what the outcome of this episode was. It was blanked out in her memory. At some point, quickly for

sure, life went back to normal, routines were resumed and that false sense of continuity that tricks you into accepting even the most awful events, took over. It's funny how getting up in the morning, brushing your teeth, getting dressed, having breakfast, going to school, the first bell, the last bell, lull us into a state of normality.

She flicks an invisible spot of dust off her jeans. It is almost completely dark now in the room. She wishes she could see him, see what he is thinking but she doesn't want the light. She breathes deeply.

- That was when I first thought of it. Of killing my father, that is.

He sits forward and looks at the small clock on the table beside her.

- *E' quasi ora. Dobbiamo finire. Ma riprenderemo a questo punto domani.* He stands and shows her to the door.

He opens the door and gestures her to her seat. She sits down and breathes deeply. She glances at his face and he looks at her expectantly, waiting for her to begin. Her thoughts are swirling about, she has no idea what to say. She looks down at her lap. Her finger reaches out towards the loose thread and begins to work it backwards and forwards. Slowly her thoughts settle. Where was she yesterday? Oh yes, when she first had the idea of killing her father.

She remembers how the idea began to flit in and out of her mind and wouldn't go away. It would be so easy.

- But I did nothing about it yet. It felt like a very big step. Then things got worse. And it became unbearable. He threatened us with a gun.

- I remember it was a rainy winter's night a few months later. About 7 o'clock. Warm yellow light spilling out onto the wet lawn through the window. I was playing in my secret place behind the couch. I remember the smell of cooking. Onions frying. I think my Mom was making braised steak and mashed potatoes and gem squash and green beans for supper. I knew I was going to gag on the beans as usual. Jelly and custard for afterwards. The radio, a big brown wooden box with black dials was transmitting Mark Saxon and Sergei Gromikov in *No Place to Hide*. My father was in his big chair next to the fireplace. Still wearing his white hospital coat with CPA/KPA stamped in red across the breast in a cross. A glass of beer on the armrest. A crate of beer half hidden behind his chair. There was the smell of beer mixed with the smell of onions. He began to quarrel with my brother. I don't

remember why he was so angry, what we had done wrong. Suddenly he pulled something out of his pocket. Small, metallic. I remember thinking, 'that's a gun.' It didn't look real or dangerous, but I knew without question that it was. He pointed it at us. From where I sat I could see the black hole leading inwards to emptiness. I crouched down as small as I could to get out of sight of the hole. Things moved fast. There was screaming and shouting and running feet and cold and dark and then I was in the car with my mother and the boys and we were driving away fast. No time for feelings, just the need to get away.

She remembers how they parked under a jacaranda tree outside the police station. Nobody said a word. The blue flowers were heavy with water. The rain dripped down onto the metalwork chassis of the car making loud plonking sounds, or flatly and dully onto the tarmac outside. Her mom was too proud to go inside and ask for help, so they just sat there and waited. The night passed slowly. Her legs and feet turned numb with the cold.

She stops, bothered by a detail. If it was winter there wouldn't have been flowers on the jacaranda tree. They flower in November. But it was winter, of that she is sure. She remembers how cold it was.

At some point, after many hours, her mother decided they should go back home. They parked in the street in front of the house. She and the boys discussed what to do next. Anna remembers that she was too little, they didn't ask her opinion. They agreed at last that Anna should go into the house and see where he was. It remembers that they decided that she should go because she was his favourite – they thought he would not hurt her.

- I wasn't so sure. But it was funny, you know. I was terrified, but I also felt quite special and important.

She remembers how the house was dark, the garden was dark, and there were no stars or moon to light the way. She remembers opening the gate and walking across the black wet lawn, her bare feet icy cold and wet. What would she find? Would he be looming behind the door in the dark, shadowy, mad, ready to kill? Would he have shot himself and be lying on the ground in a puddle of blood? Her childish imagination ran riot. But she kept walking. She reached the front door and hesitated, then on tiptoe she grabbed the door handle and turned it and the door began to open.

- *Come e` finita la storia?*

He waits, watching her carefully.

She thinks, feeling confused.

- I don't know what happened next. I can't remember. There's a kind of dead end. It all goes blank. I know that I went to school as usual the next day, I always did. I know that it was never mentioned again. I don't know how it ended. Perhaps he had gone to bed.

- *"Ma perche` mi racconti questa storia se non sai com'e` finita?"* he says irritated.

- I suppose it was the first time that I lost my memory like that. I told you I have problems with my memory," she says defensively. One of the doctors called it dissociation. I don't know.

- Anyway that was when I decided to use my power. Don't laugh. I knew I had been chosen for this.

- That night, after my bedtime prayer, I added a few words, asking for him to die. As simple as that.

- I was sure it would work.

She shakes her head slowly.

- And then he did. Die, I mean. But I helped the process along a little.

She remembers how it happened a few days later when she came home from school. She saw him swaying there in the doorway at the top of the stairs, his heavy body outlined against the afternoon sun. It was a question of an instant. Her hand touched the worn fabric of his white hospital jacket, the one with the red cross over the pocket, felt the warmth of his body beneath. A quick push was all it took. There was no resistance.

She remembers how he tumbled down headfirst, slowly, time seemed to slow down as she stood there where he had stood only a second before, her hand on the doorframe, watching. His body was soft; he didn't resist the pressure, he was like a lifeless object. And when he reached the bottom he just lay there, motionless.

She remembers how she went back to her bedroom and lay down on her bed in her school uniform. She supposes she must have fallen asleep. When she woke up her mother was home. She could hear her moving around the kitchen. Her mother told her there had been an accident and her Dad had been hurt. The doctor came.

- *Era morto?* he asks.

- No. it took some for that to happen. You know, it's actually quite difficult to kill someone, I've come to realise. I don't know if you've ever tried. The body puts up a huge fight for survival. It's even more difficult to take your own life.

- Hmm.



- *Continua*, he says.

- He wasn't dead yet. My mother called the doctor who brought him around and helped him back to bed. He seemed fine and the doctor left.

- I remember how my father began talking, long rambling monologues the way he often did when he was drunk. And I remember how my mother often found it difficult to sleep because of his talking, on and on. And she had a heavy day at work the next day. And at last she came to my bed, as she had done on other occasions, and asked me to take her place in theirs so that she could get some sleep.

Anna stops talking. She closes her eyes and it is as if she has gone once again to that darkened room. Her voice is low and he has to strain to hear what she is saying.

- I remember how high my parents' bed seemed that night. I climbed it like a mountain. I lay beside him hoping he wouldn't notice me. But he did. In the dark I heard him chuckle. He stretched out his arm and pulled me to him and I went.

- And when it was over, I lay praying for death for him. Perhaps for myself as well.

- But he was awake beside me in the bed. In the dark. He lit another cigarette. I remember hearing the clink of glass as he poured more beer, the sound of him swallowing. And then the talking started again, about work, about Van, his assistant, and all the usual things, and my eyes grew heavy. But something was different tonight, not quite the same; his thoughts were confused, the speech long and rambling more than usual, and I watched the glow of his cigarette in the dark, and sometimes he dozed off in mid sentence but just when I was beginning to relax he started talking again. And now his speech was slurred so that I could hardly understand what he was saying. At last he fell silent.

She sighs and changes position.

- Are you bored?

- *No*. He shakes his head. *Continua*.

- As dawn found its way through the threadbare curtains into the smoky, beery room, my mother bustled in to start the day. But he just lay there, inert. And then she was on the phone to the doctor and we children were packed off to school earlier than usual.

- *Era morto?* Was he dead?

- Not yet. Why are you so impatient?

She remembers the scratchy anger she felt as dawn fingered its way through the curtains into the dank-smelling untidy room where he lay unconscious, silent, his breathing

now slow.

She remembers how early, earlier than usual, she was up and pulling on her school uniform, the light blue shirt and tie, the navy tunic, the navy blazer over the top. Underneath, the thick cotton bloomers and grey socks. It was cold and drizzling as she made her way up the hill to school. She was the first child in the playground and she didn't know what to do. The school buildings were still locked. She went and sat on the dead tree trunk in the glade and waited. Blankly, thoughtlessly; comatose like her father.

The school day gently unfolded with its ritual of bells and chalk dust and structure, bringing some kind of solace with its predictability and routine, and it passed unobserved like all the others before and after it.

- There was no-one at home when I came back from school. The house was quiet and cold. There was nothing to eat but I wasn't hungry. I went outside and the chickens flocked to the fence of their run. They'd obviously not been fed. I went back to the kitchen and measured out a bowlful of food and took it to them. They fought over the corn that I sprinkled about.

She remembers how she crouched down and held out a few kernels on the palm of her hand to her favourite hen – she was a scruffy, skinny, hen-pecked creature with a torn comb and bare neck who had managed to avoid the pot for so long because she looked so unhealthy. The hen turned her head to one side, glared at Anna with a beady eye and at last pecked the grain from her hand, then jumped back. Now that she had nothing for her the hen ignored her. She remembers she started to sing her a hymn from Sunday school that she felt sure she must like, *Under His Wing*, but the hen took no notice and kept scratching around in the dirt. The rooster took a few cautious strides towards her in the hope that she might have something for him, but when he saw that her hands were empty he moved away. She was glad. He scared her.

She remembers how her mother came back after dark. There was no supper, but none of them was hungry. She was tired and looked worried. They sat in the lounge and she told them that their Dad was in hospital. He was in a coma. There was massive haemorrhaging in his brain from the fall. He was on a life-support system.

It's strange, she thinks. Everything seemed so flat, so unemotional. Drained of meaning. Even now, telling him the story she can't feel anything.

- We sat and waited. At about ten the phone rang. It was the hospital. The damage was

too extensive. They wanted permission to disconnect the life-support system. There was nothing we could do but wait for him to die.

- We waited. I prayed. You know by now what I was praying. Perhaps the others were also praying for the same thing. I don't know, I haven't asked.

- At two a.m. the doctor called to say he was dead. Wordlessly, without looking at each other, we got up and went to bed. Did I sleep? I don't know. I suppose so.

- And that was that.

She sits forward and looks at him.

- You don't say anything? I suppose it leaves you cold.

She wonders fleetingly why she feels so angry with him.

- *Mah!* Perhaps you are wondering why it left you so cold?

- Mmm. Perhaps it was all too much for me to handle?

- It sounds like it was a difficult time for you.

She laughs sarcastically.

- I might have known you would say something non-committal. Difficult doesn't really do it, does it? Anyway, let me finish the story.

She remembers how the next morning she went to school as usual. In the playground she told her friends she had a secret, feeling strangely proud and special. But she wouldn't tell them what. The bell went for school and they filed into class. They stood for the Lord's Prayer.

- *"Our Father, who art in Heaven."*

She remembers how she burst into wild, uncontrollable tears.

She feels upset. Strange that it is this memory amongst all the others that takes her back to what it was like.

She remembers how the teacher took her to the sick room. She made her lie down on the narrow bed in the corner of the room and covered her with a blanket. She asked Anna what was wrong. She remembers saying:

- "My father died last night."

The teacher, she still remembers her name was Miss Fourie, patted her shoulder, blankly. She quite clearly didn't know what to do, whether to go back to her classroom, stay here with Anna or go to the headmaster. She was young, fresh from teacher training college, inexperienced. Eventually she left Anna alone.

-I remember how I lay there in the bare room. I didn't know what to do. I didn't feel sick. There was no reason for me to be in bed. I didn't want to be alone. After a few minutes I got up, straightened the bed and went back to class. Everyone avoided looking at me as I walked in, although I could feel their eyes on my back when I sat down. I knew the teacher must have told them.

- It suddenly occurred to me that they didn't know that I had murdered my father. Because that was what I suddenly realised I had done.

- I'm a murderer, I remember thinking to myself in surprise.

She looks out of the window, at the neatly raked sand in the courtyard, the bushes that grow around the sides and enclose the room like a cave.

She remembers how she waited all of that day and the days that followed in an agony of terror and excitement for the police to come and arrest her. She felt quite sure they would put her into jail.

She remembers how for a long time the rest of the world fell into shadow for her. Only his death was real, highlighted by her mind.

A few days later she came home from school and the house was full of people and flowers. She had never seen so many people in the house before. They'd never had visitors before. It was a cold, overcast, rainy day. The smell of lilies and chrysanthemums and mud was overwhelming. The smell of the dead. She could hardly breathe. She tried to reach her mother but there were too many people in the way.

- "Not now, Anna", she said.

She remembers his body lay stretched out on the table, clothed in his best suit, hands crossed on his breast. His pale jowls hung heavily over the starched collar that forced his head and neck into an unnatural rigidity. Threaded through the collar like a noose was his old regimental tie.

She remembers that there were scones and tea cups and plates laid out in the lounge but no-one was eating yet. She ducked under the table where her father lay and sat as far as she could from the sea of tweed jackets and damp woollen skirts and heavy shoes. It was dark and cool and quiet in there. She curled up tight hoping that no-one would notice her. But of course someone did.

She remembers how the table cloth was lifted and a huge face distorted by gravity appeared, wet lips outstretched for a kiss. She remembers withdrawing and turning her

head, and the lips pulling apart to show teeth. She remembers being dragged out and forced to submit to the kiss. She remembers how a cousin took her to a car and they set off for a drive which kept them away all afternoon because it was not thought right for children to go to funerals, to Bains Kloof and Wemmershoek dam and Steenbras dam and she remembers thinking it looked like pictures she had seen of Canada; perhaps they were in Canada. She remembers wishing she could go far away to Canada where no-one could find her. She didn't know her cousin who was much older than her, and they didn't talk at all. Just drove, silently, in the grey drizzle. They got home after five. Everyone had gone; the house was empty, only the flowers remained to remind them that anything out of the ordinary had happened. But she remembers she didn't dare to ask about it. She imagined '*the funeral*' had taken place although she didn't know what a funeral would have looked like. She wondered if her father had been buried in the graveyard that she and her mother and brothers walked past every Friday evening on their way to the library, where the owls hooted in the trees. She remembers the marching song they used to sing as they walked past it when she felt scared:

I left, I left, I left my wife with five fat babies

Right, right, right at the bottom of the kitchen stairs.

I left, left etc.

She remembers how difficult it was to change foot with a little skip at just the right place.

She senses him watching her.

- A few days later I helped my mother to clear out his cupboards. We put everything into cardboard boxes.

- We never spoke of him again.

She moves in her chair feeling tired. She wishes he would say something, comment. But of course he won't. He will hold back, waiting for her to talk, to project her inner world into the room. Then what will he do with it? she wonders. Will he use it against her? She doesn't really care any more. She just wants to finish.

- You know, there was an autopsy and the official version was that he had been drinking as usual, he had fallen down the stairs and hit his head on the floor and lost consciousness. No-one suspected my part in it. I was the only one who knew what had really happened.

- That you killed him.

- Yes.

She remembers how in those months after the funeral she was always at home. The house felt dark and cold but she had no desire to be anywhere else. There was no need to go and play at her friends' any more or to go and sing to the chickens. In fact she had no desire for company. The only thing she craved was food. Sweet, sugary, milky things, comforting and soothing. Every day when she came home from school, alone in the dark, cold house, she baked herself batches of scones, or cakes which she ate by herself in the darkened lounge. She took no pleasure in it. In a secret compartment of an old desk was a key. The key to the liquor cabinet. Here stood an empty whisky bottle filled with small silver coins, *tickies* they were called. Each afternoon after school she unlocked the cabinet and took four or five *tickies*. She walked to Spiro's General Dealers and filled her pockets with sweets of every kind. Sunrise toffees, nigger balls, candy cigarettes.

She realized it was only a question of time before her mother found out. The level of the coins was dropping by the day.

She has a sudden vivid memory of walking past the police station in her Brownie uniform talking to her best friend about Brownie tests and badges, and at the same moment having the clear knowledge that she was a thief and a murderer, and wondering what her friend would say if she knew, wondering if the police would somehow know and come rushing out to catch her. She remembers how she became aware of the hangings at that time. Every few days on the front page of the Cape Times there would be a report about hangings in the Pretoria Central prison. And she remembers how at night she dreamed about the electric chair.

She also remembers finding out where babies came from and being afraid she might be pregnant.

She smiles.

- I didn't go to prison as I thought I should, of course, but I was sent to boarding school, a Catholic convent, instead.

He glances at the clock. Without saying a word she gets up and goes to the door.

She sits down without looking at him. Her eyes slide across the floor and fix themselves on the tip of his shoes. He lights a cigarette and waits. Her thoughts flit over the events of the day and slowly settle.

She thinks a moment about the convent. She remembers how it seemed to bring it all

together, the obsession with death and blood and sex. And of course sin and guilt and punishment. Death was her father, the dying Christ, the bones of the saints in the reliquaries, the fainting, herself. Blood was the blood of Christ, the bleeding heart of the Virgin Mary, menstrual blood. And sex, oh sex was the secret pleasure in bed, was her father, was the developing bodies of the other girls. And the pain was everywhere, her loneliness, her guilt, the unbearable monthly ache. All swathed in clouds of incense and incantations.

She remembers early morning mass in the convent. The girls were called when it was still dark, at about five am. They would still be sleeping heavily, breathing warmly on their pillows in the chilly dormitory when the nun appeared at the door. A bell rang. It was time for them to get up.

The nun began to recite a prayer in a low voice. They woke up and slipped out of their narrow iron beds and, kneeling in their nighties on the hard cold floor with their heads bowed and their hands folded in front of them, they repeated the words they knew so well.

*Hail Mary. Full of grace  
the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou amongst women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God  
pray for us sinners  
now and at the hour of our death.  
Amen*

She remembers how they repeated the words after her in the bare hall, all forty wild-haired sinners. Then they rose, and in the semi-darkness, pretending no-one could see them, they pulled on their school uniforms and light blue veils to cover their heads and faces, the gauze making the world turn misty and vague. She remembers how they avoided each others' eyes, still heavy with sleep, and shuffled downstairs to line up in the refectory where they stood dully, blinking in the bright electric light. Then, at a sign from the nun, they filed silently along the cloister and down a few steps into the chapel.

She remembers the sweet cloying smell of incense, carbolic and dried menstrual blood that hit her nostrils as they entered. The chapel was dimly lit only with candlelight that wavered in the gust of air that they carried with them. The back rows were filled with grey

shapes, the cloistered nuns who were never seen, obese, hidden in the shadows, who never spoke. The girls had strict instructions not to turn their heads and look at them.

She remembers the hushed movements with which they filled the pews at the front, and knelt on the creaking boards. She remembers lifting her eyes and seeing the altar gleaming in front of her. She remembers a picture of the dying Christ with bleeding hands and open heart, hung on one side. The virgin gazed with despairing love from the other. She bowed her head like the other girls and waited. The room was filled with expectancy.

She remembers how a bell would ring somewhere in the distance and a rush of footsteps hurry around the side of the chapel and a door slam. Mumbling voices could be heard and then the bell rang again. She remembers how the priest entered from behind the altar, gloriously dressed in flowing green and white robes that glowed in the candle light. He carried a brass censer which he swung from side to side and clouds of incense filled the dark church. He hung it to one side, genuflected deeply and then turned and raised his hands in benediction.

- *Lord have mercy*, he intoned and the voices of the girls and the nuns repeated after him.

*Lord, have mercy.*

*Christ, have mercy*

*Lord, have mercy*

*Lord, have mercy*

She remembers how she peered through her veil at the Father Confessor, the only man allowed in this place of women. He was kneeling in front of the altar, his eyes closed, a pious expression on his face. A silver cross was embroidered across his shoulders and body. She remembers his heavy black shoes sticking out of the bottom of his robes. Mud clung to the sides of them. He was suddenly human. She remembers imagining his body beneath the vestments, coarse, middle-aged, swollen. A body she knew well. Her father's body with the pendulous darkness at its core.

*Almighty God the Father,*

*Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father*

*You take away the sins of the world;*

*have mercy on us.*

She remembers how blackness filled her mind and she felt herself falling, slipping to the marble floor. And then blessed oblivion.



*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.*

She realises she stopped talking some time ago and that he is looking at her expectantly. She notices that she is feeling very tired. She wonders how long she has been here. She has no idea. It is almost completely dark, and has been for a long time.

- Didn't anyone notice what was going on? *Non hanno notato niente?*

- No, no-one noticed. I kept the secret alone. You're the first person I've told about it.

She thinks it probably wasn't altogether their fault. She was secretive and they were busy. And anyway, who would suspect a child of murder, of theft, of incest? She did well at school, she socialised normally, there appeared to be no problem. And over time all the darkness began to fade in her mind as she was forced to move into her new life.

She took a distance from religion though. She remembers telling the nun who took them for Catechism that she didn't believe in God. Perhaps the confusion of God with Father was troublesome for her. And she supposes it was also a way of dealing with the guilt. If god didn't exist, then she wasn't guilty. She supposes it was a new form of patricide.

She remembers she discovered the word atheist and found it comfortable. She found atheist was often combined with the word communist, and that also began to feel comfortable. But she didn't tell the nuns about that.

- Mmm.

- I must have been twelve when I first met Charles a few months after my mother's wedding when I came home for the holidays. He was my new step-brother, about ten years older than me.

She'd heard rumours about him of course, of naked swims in the pool at night with a girlfriend, of being caught and banished, of an unwanted pregnancy, of betrayal. Rebellion. Broken rules. He was standing for election onto the student representative council at the university. He had been stopped by the police for drunken and disorderly behaviour on the Grand Parade, and had urinated on the wheel of the police van. It took all her stepfather's power and contacts to have him released without charge. He was already larger than life in Anna's twelve-year-old imagination.

She remembers walking into her parent's bedroom and there he was, sitting spinning on a rotating stool and watching himself in the mirror as he talked to his father. He eyes were

only on himself. He didn't notice her and went on with his conversation. She felt like an intruder and went back to her room. But a few days later he tapped on her door.

She remembers that first meeting vividly, his dark curly hair, his huge blue eyes, his quick movements. She realises it must only have been much later that she noticed his fine wrists and ankles, the delicate hands, the square well-manicured finger nails, although they all seemed to be present in her mind in that first moment. She remembers his mocking gravelly voice, the histrionics, the swagger. The impact on her was massive.

She remembers the house was filled with electoral posters with a giant photograph of his face on them, dominated by those brooding eyes.

By the time she got back from school for the next holidays, the elections were over. The campaign posters were down and Charles was so busy she hardly saw him. She would hear his car skid into the driveway in the early hours of the morning, feel the slam of the front door shake the floorboards under her bed, and his footsteps run up the stairs to his room. By six o'clock he would be gone. It was only by hanging around outside the kitchen, listening to the cook gossiping endlessly with the housekeeper, that she worked out that he had been elected onto the SRC.

- A week into the holidays he came looking for me.

He flung open the door of her room without knocking and entered with a flourish, a portable typewriter under his arm. They (the SRC) had decided to invite Bobby Kennedy, US senator and brother to John, to speak at the university. They had written a letter to him. They needed someone to type it out.

- Would I?

- They would pay me 10c a page.

- At thirteen, typing was not amongst my accomplishments. But I gazed at him in puppy-like adoration, not hearing a word as he explained the importance of this visit. I would do anything he asked.

- "Yes", I remember nodding, yes, yes, yes.

She remembers how she set up the typewriter on her pink glass-topped dressing table and prepared three sheets of writing paper interspersed with two sheets of carbon paper. She remembers how she fed the thick wad onto the reel and began to type.

Four lines down she made her first mistake. She began again. This time she made a mistake in the address. She ripped out the wad of paper, replaced the carbon paper and

started again. By the time she got to the tenth line, she was so engrossed that she didn't hear the ping warning her to go to a new line, and she kept typing off the edge of the page.

One hundred attempts later she was still going.

At attempt one hundred and twenty-seven, she finally completed the whole letter without obvious mistakes. She placed it, with its progressively paler copies, on his bed and waited for him to return.

She remembers how at four in the morning she heard his battered yellow car roar into the driveway. She remembers hearing him slam the door and run upstairs. A few minutes later he raced back down the passage and out. She could hear him gunning his car along the main road for many minutes. After a while she tiptoed down the passage. His door stood wide open. The letter was gone.

- He never paid me the 20c he owed me for the work. He never spoke to me about Bobby Kennedy again. But when, in June 1966 Bobby Kennedy addressed the students in Jamison Hall, I felt very special and proud.

- *Speciale. Hai gia` usato questa parola altre volte.*

- Yes, I suppose I did feel special. Perhaps I still do. It wasn't always a good feeling.

- Anyway, that was the year he embarked on my sentimental education.

She remembers he started by bringing her a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

She remembers the silver cover of the paperback, how special that felt.

She devoured it in the space of a few hours, but then she didn't know what to do with it. She wanted to give the book back to him and say something witty, something that would make him think she was grown up and sophisticated. But she couldn't think of anything that would work. Eventually she left it on his bed while he was out.

For a few days he ignored her. She was grateful for his silence

Then one evening, on his way out, he tapped on the door. He held out a new book.

- "I think you might find this interesting."

It was *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir. She remembers how she blushed and quickly slipped it under her pillow, embarrassed to have that word between them. After dinner she went straight to her room to read, but this time she was disappointed. There was little about sex and no story at all. She forced herself to read it to the end, and put it back on his bed.

A week later he was back with another one, this time by Masters and Johnson. He gazed

at her intently as he handed it over. *The Human Sexual Response*. And it was all she wanted to know and more.

And then came the banned books, Marx, de Sade, Achebe, books she was vaguely aware she could be arrested for having. She remembers one in particular about the distribution of land in South Africa and the Group Areas Act. The books took her out and above the petty conventionality of her family, the blinkered mysticism of the nuns, the giggling awkwardness of the other girls at school.

- I told my friends at school that I had become a communist.

He grunts and crosses his legs.

- What year was that?

- I suppose nineteen sixty-four or five. Something like that.

She thinks it must have been just a few years after the Rivonia trial, because she wasn't allowed to walk on the Common any more because it was too dangerous.

- It must be difficult for you to understand all of this? It was a strange mixture of worlds, Africa and the land question, the convent, the *suburbs* where I grew up, Kennedy – both Kennedy's in fact, the Cuban crisis.

- Not too difficult. But go on. *Continua*.

- I remember that year, the forced removals. Our history teacher took me and two other girls to take blankets to where the people had been set down. It was just two or three of us in a car with two nuns. I remember feeling too ashamed to look.

She remembers a muddy street, a tall woman with a baby on her back staring at them. She was the only person who looked at them. It didn't feel like anger or hope or anything. She couldn't make sense of it. What did it mean? What were these people doing there? From what she could see, nothing. Just standing in the drizzle. No, not even that. Just standing. As animals sometimes will.

- I remember when I went home during school holidays, the parties my mother and new step-father held for their friends.

There was a circular dance floor in the garden and a bronze statue of Mercury in the centre with black and white rays of marble emanating from his plinth. She remembers watching the guests arrive from the balcony of her darkened room above. She remembers the women in long silk dresses expensively perfumed, beautifully blonde in the candle light. She remembers their shrill laughter tinkling against the chorus of male guffaws. She

remembers the smell of expensive cigars. She remembers the waiters in black suits and white gloves serving drinks tinkling with ice in long-stemmed crystal glasses from silver trays. And then the music would start, sensuous, rhythmic, always *Ramona* first. And the dark suited men and the long dressed women swayed and swirled around and around.

She remembers her anger.

- I remember an overcast day, blinding sun slanting through dark clouds, ambiguous, the last remnants of winter, the last lesson of the day. 1966. I had my tiny transistor radio hidden in the pocket of my school uniform, the wire of the earphone inside the sleeve, my head propped on my hand pretending to listen to the geography teacher's dull monotone, but actually absorbed in *From Crystal with Love* on Springbok Radio. I heard the regular transmission being interrupted, the bleeps that introduced a news bulletin, the staccato voice of the announcer.

*The Prime Minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd has been stabbed by an unnamed assailant as parliamentarians are filing back to their seats after lunch. He has been rushed to hospital - his condition has been described as critical.*

She remembers she jumped up in her seat and shouted "Verwoerd is dead". She remembers that her radio was confiscated.

- Don't tell me you thought you were part of that too? *Non mi dire!*

- I was sure I was. I had done this before, remember? I had wished him dead and he had died. I had killed him.

It all seemed to be linked, the Cuban crisis, John Kennedy, my father's death, me, Kennedy's assassination, Bobby Kennedy's visit, and now Verwoerd. I couldn't help thinking I had a part in it.

- In my dreams I watched it happening, it was me but I was on the outside, watching it happen. I pushed through the crowd and came abreast.

- "Father?" I said.

- "Mr Prime Minister?" he said.

- He raised his eyes, blue grey eyes, uncurious to meet mine, and for an eternity we gazed at each other, and our souls touched, gingerly, feeling around each other, fingering each other's physical presence, and then suddenly he knew me, suddenly he was aware of me, of his danger. His mortal danger. He tried to lever himself heavily out of his deep green leather throne. And I struck. I struck at the belly. Fat and white and hairy. The blade slid in easily. I

struck again and again. I felt a closeness with this body that felt almost like love. Blood poured out as I kept stabbing, turning his white shirt red and his black suit brown and washing me all over in a hot sticky mess and I tasted a metallic flavour in my mouth and they were holding my arms and throwing me to the ground and still I kept stabbing.

- Night after night I relived this scene.

- And they grabbed me, three men on one side, three men on the other, and they grappled me to the floor, and still I was watching, it was right so, they should do so to someone who has killed her father, the prime minister. They kicked my head, they dragged me out. One man punched me, he punched so hard he broke my nose and I fell back onto the floor and I took with me the three men on the one side and three on the other, and we lay there on the carpet while everybody milled around and women screamed.

She pauses, annoyed with herself, trying to sort out the confusion in her mind. How much of that came from Liza Key's film and how much was her own memory? That detail of the three men on one side and three on the other definitely came from the film. Tsafendas himself told the story that way. But the film only came out in 1999. She is certain that Tsafendas was often in her thoughts at that time, but in what way she can't remember. She decides to drop that. What happened next? It's so difficult to tell. She decides to just let her thoughts meander without trying to control the flow and see where they go.

- Inside me was death. All day, every day it was here with me.

- Death and sex.

- I remember long conversations in the dormitory after lights out about whether you should stay a virgin until you are married or not. The consensus was yes, that was what a man wanted. I remember not being sure whether I was a virgin or not. Did it count with your father? I didn't tell them about that. We all agreed that we would stay virgins until the day we got married.

She remembers when she was chosen to lead the school debating team in a match against another convent. The title of the debate was: *It is possible to be a Christian in South Africa*. Her team had to argue that it was not possible. She remembers she wrote a very long inflammatory paper in preparation, extensively citing her banned books on Marx, land issues, apartheid, Christian morality, Sartre. Because Sartre and Camus and Dostoevsky were what she was now reading. The nuns told her she could take part in the debate only if she censored her paper. She refused, so one of the other girls took her place. She

remembers attending the debate, hearing the arguments about charity and good deeds and pious thoughts, and realising how meaningless her school education had become.

- *E' ora. Dobbiamo terminare per oggi. Ti vedro' domani?*

She gets to her feet and walks to the door.

It feels as if she has never left the room. She sits down and her thoughts go straight back to 1967.

- I've been thinking. Where I ended yesterday was not important. I think there's something that is a much more central part of the story.

She thinks a moment.

- I must have been about fifteen. I remember I was introduced to a professor from the university by the parents of one of my school friends.

He was already an old man with a white beard and hair. She remembers he always wore what looked like a shoe-lace knotted around his neck in place of a tie. She remembers having Sunday dinner at his house, family and students and friends around a big table in the evening. She was the youngest person present. It was an ongoing invitation, every Sunday night, and she went more than once. They talked about art or ideas, or recited poetry – she remembers a middle-aged woman getting up and dancing Zorba's dance in front of the fire while she cringed in an agony of adolescent embarrassment – and she was both excited and terrified at the same time. She remembers it was a big square table, or could it have been round? Certainly the feeling was that ideas could be shared and passed backwards and forwards, that anything could become worthy of discussion. She doesn't remember much light in the room. All the light was on the table, on the faces of those gathered there, while behind their shoulders the room fell into gloom. Like a painting by Rembrandt or Vermeer, that is how she remembers it.

- I remember we talked about Augustine. Of Hippo. And Buber. And Buber and Eliot. And Tillich. There was a fire in the grate so it must have been winter. Or was it just that the house, old, Victorian, in the shadow of Devil's Peak, was always cold, so there were always fires? Or perhaps there was no fire. Perhaps the fire was in me. We talked about Buber. About I. And Thou. About relationships that have no meaning. About rare moments of connection. It was warm, I felt full. It was 1968.

She read as much as she could in French. When she couldn't find books in French she

would translate the English books into French for herself, as if inside herself she couldn't understand English. She slipped seamlessly into this world, at night especially, sleeping little or not at all. Now her whole world became French.

- I remember how at night I used to lie awake, dreaming open-eyed of Paris, of the student protests, of the barricades.

- *E già`. Il sessantotto. Anni caldi a Parigi.* Hot years.

She remembers trying to think only in French, practicing what she would say when she finally met Jean-Paul Sartre at the *Café des Deux Maggots*. She pictured herself, slim, Frenchly beautiful, running, Molotov aloft, flaming, hurling it into the night. In some versions she was shot or wounded. Always the acrid smell of teargas weaving clouds about her, catching her throat, making her eyes run and her chest heave. There was the shine of water on dark asphalt, images in black and white like the flickering newsreels she saw.

He lights another cigarette and inhales deeply.

- It was also the year that Bobby Kennedy was assassinated.

She begins again, her voice strangely tight and strained.

- There was the night I climbed into Charles's bed. And those when he followed me to mine.

She closes her eyes.

- You know, he blamed me for what we were doing together, and told me I was amoral to want him.

Was she amoral, she wonders? Is it amoral to want someone? What does morality have to do with it?

She remembers how at school she raced ahead with her work, not needing the teachers' explanations in class. She worked through the maths textbook in the first quarter of the year, the same with history and biology. She slowly lost ties with the reality of the classroom, the work she was doing not related to that of the other pupils. The teachers tolerated this, considering her special, that word again, and outside the normal progressions of the class.

- During the holidays, that year or later I don't remember, I met a boy, a student who was on the outermost fringes of the student movement at UCT.

Somehow she found herself involved under the blue, blue sky of Cape Town, the grey



pinkness of Table Mountain, the smell of crushed cannabis, just a handful of protesters, a massive police contingent, fully armed.

She remembers a large bellied constable with a mouth hailer shouting that they had just two minutes to disperse, a man driving past waving his fist at them. Then the tear gas, the charge, the constable diving over the barricade and landing on his face, their laughter turning to terror as they scattered, running haphazardly for shelter. She heard footsteps behind her; she sped up and dodged out of a side gate into the street, sensing freedom. There were more policemen outside.

Perhaps, she thinks, if she had been more involved it would have been different. As it was that episode was the end of it all.

- So you didn't become an activist.

- No.

She thinks for a minute.

- I fell silent instead. I think it all just became too much.

She remembers the day Charles arrived home with his new wife. It must have been at about the same time. She remembers sitting in her school uniform watching them from the window of her upstairs room as they lounged next to the statue of Mercury, drinking tea and eating scones. She remembers the woman's husky laughter as he took her bare foot into his lap and held it between his hands, massaging it, circling the instep with his thumb, softly, tickling, and then slipped his hand up her calf and under her dress.

- I remember how he took her hand and led her inside. I knew exactly what they were going to do. I remember I could hardly breathe.

She stops.

- From one day to the next I stopped talking. Words became impossible and language a foreign land. Dangerous, incomprehensible, treacherous.

She knew that if someone had threatened her life, or if the building were to catch fire, some part of her would be able to react, would cry out, would run. She knew it wasn't a physical barrier that couldn't be overcome. Somewhere, some part of her knew she could choose to be different, to break the silence and paralysis. Except she chose not to. Or perhaps not. Perhaps she had no choice. Perhaps she was too young. Perhaps she was still caught in the web of events that had rendered her silent.

She remembers how for a long time nobody noticed. You can get by on nods and shakes

of the head and smiles, she thinks. Especially smiles. People love to talk about themselves, and if you smile they think you agree.

She smiled often.

She remembers how she could of course still understand. And thoughts still coursed through her brain using words. It wasn't that she had lost the ability. It was just that language as communication had become impossible, too painful, too dangerous.

- I think they call it aphasia, or elective mutism or something like that. You would know.

- Hmm. He raises his eyebrows but doesn't speak.

They asked her what was wrong. And she didn't know. Explain. Be responsible. Account for yourself. But she couldn't. There were some things she couldn't tell them about, but she also couldn't work out, couldn't make the connections in all the mess of memories, which events had caused this to happen. She just knew that she felt unsafe and ashamed, so she withdrew to a place deep inside herself. She walked the streets and made eye contact with strangers, staring at them until they averted their eyes.

- My mother made an appointment for me to see a doctor.

She remembers he had large rooms on the Foreshore. She already knew him by name – he was one of the team of specialists who had assessed Dimitri Tsafendas after he assassinated Verwoerd. His name had been in the newspapers.

She thinks how strange it is the way time contracted and expanded disturbingly at about that time. She knows that years disappeared from her memory banks, but she doesn't know what it is she can't remember. Yet she remembers single moments with brilliant clarity of which she knows every detail, every smell and sound.

There was an appointment with the doctor. He had a rich Persian carpet carefully spread across the floor of his consulting room. His shiny black shoes surmounted by grey and black pinstriped trousers stood amongst its scarlet and blue peacocks and swirling flowers.

She sat, she remembers, fifteen or sixteen years old, hunched up on a low armchair in the waiting room, head bowed, oblivious to everything around her. The glass coffee table piled high with magazines held no attraction. She was dressed in her school uniform – thick beige stockings, heavy brown lace-up shoes, blue dress, blue blazer, anonymous. Her long brown hair hung loosely about her face like a screen in defiance of school regulations. Even after all these years she can still remember the waiting room.

At last the receptionist signalled to her to go inside. The doctor sat across a high desk

clear of everything except an empty file and a pen. She looked down at her hands.

- "So, Anna, tell me about yourself."

She didn't know what to say. What could she tell him? What was there to say? So she sat there as the doctor spoke, hearing but not really hearing what he was saying. He examined her reflexes, tapped her knee with a little hammer marking her jerk. Asked her questions which she didn't answer. He gave up eventually. He got up and called her mother into the room. Anna watched them talking, watched the smiles, the mouths opening and closing. Back in the car, a short journey to *Volks Hospital* in the Gardens, to another doctor, nurses, being clothed in a surgical gown and told to get into bed. Lying waiting. No, not waiting. Just lying. Not sick. Not anything.

The hospital was small, more like a sprawling Victorian house, her room large, with elaborate pressed ceilings and a bay window looking out onto the park with Table Mountain rising above the trees behind it. She was given a surgical gown and told to get into bed. She lay there wordlessly, not caring about anything.

- The next morning I was placed on a stretcher and wheeled into an operating theatre. The doctor from the day before, an anaesthetist, two nurses. They applied an electrode to each of my temples, others to my chest. The electrodes on my temples were attached to a little white metal box, strangely primitive in appearance, like an old fashioned, enamel-coated butcher's scale. Two dials. A switch.

The anaesthetist trafficked around her arm, found an artery. The doctors exchanged glances. The anaesthetist told her to count to ten. She remembers counting to seven before the synthetic surge flooded her nostrils and brain.

He uncrosses and crosses his legs.

She remembers when she woke up and her head and neck ached. It hurt to open her eyes. She was back in her bed. She remembers being aware of a flash through her brain, like having looked straight into the sun. Except it wouldn't go away. Everything was white. Walls, ceiling, pressed ceiling with little plaster flowers around the edges, sheets, blankets. The nurses were white. The food was white. Mashed potatoes, steamed chicken, cauliflower, ice cream. There was nothing else. No thoughts, no inner dialogue. She slept. She remembers waking up and finding one of the electrodes still on her chest. The nurse told her to leave it there. They would use it again.

- Every second day this was repeated. I forget how often. Some days I managed to count

to eight before the surge filled my brain. Other days I only got to five. At some point it all became confused. Just flash after flash of blinding light. I don't remember leaving the hospital.

She sighs.

It's strange, she thinks, language can't really express what happened. She remembers how all her thoughts slowed down. Disappeared. Just blinding whiteness and pain and confusion. Perhaps that was the point. It felt like the punishment she had been expecting for so many years, not the electric chair but almost. Her mother visited and brought her chocolate. White chocolate. She was hungry, starving and devoured slab after slab, larva-like. One day, she supposes, her mother came to fetch her. She had been in hospital for a month – or so she thinks now, years later. About twenty shocks through her brain. Give or take a few. There are no records. The hospital has since become a private clinic and all old records have been destroyed. Along with many memories of those years.

- One small memory remains. I remember hearing the radio broadcasting the first words of Neil Armstrong from the moon – the Eagle has landed – as we drove home from the hospital. *That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.*

- *E già`. Mi ricordo. Era il 1969. Il 21 Luglio.*

- If you say so. Of course the ECT didn't cure me. What good would a series of electric shocks to my brain do to the situation I was in?

- There were more doctors. A few weeks later, somehow, I don't remember how, I ended up in Groote Schuur, the psychiatric ward right up at the top of the hospital. Three months later I was discharged. Un-improved. The doctor told me they could do nothing for me if I wouldn't speak. And that I had read too much Eliot and Sartre. I began to wonder about psychiatrists and how much wisdom they really had.

That is all she can remember of those three months. Except for the earthquake. She remembers the date, the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1969. The building swayed violently up there on the fifth floor and she remembers feeling unafraid. And looking down from the window one morning she saw Chris Barnard jump over the door of his open MG to get out. It must have been summertime to have the roof down like that. He must have been young, before arthritis crippled him.

- There was also the day when I received a special prize for English awarded to me in absentia, a leather bound volume of the collected works of Shakespeare which I have

carried with me ever since.

He clears his throat.

- *E poi? Che cosa e' successo?*

- Well, and then I came to Italy?

- *Ma come? Perche'?* Why? Why Italy?

- I don't really want to talk about this. I've told you about my childhood and all that stuff.

Isn't that enough. No? Why do you need to dig into everything? You told me to tell you what seemed important to me.

- But I don't understand otherwise. It doesn't make sense. *Devi spiegarti meglio.*

She wonders why she feels so annoyed. This whole story is just so tedious and shameful. And she has never spoken to anyone about what really happened before. How will he react, she wonders.

She closes her eyes and clenches her jaw and decides to try.

- Why Italy? I don't really know. It wasn't a question of choice. If I had chosen to go anywhere, if I'd had the energy to choose, I would have chosen Paris, of course. But I think my mother had met someone who knew someone who had studied Italian at the University for Foreigners in Perugia and had had lots of fun. Fun has always been important for her. I think she probably didn't know what to do with me any more and this seemed like a good enough solution. And perhaps it was. Perhaps also she knew about me and Charles. As she had known about me and my father. It certainly was one way of getting me out of the situation I was in. So she put me onto a plane and sent me to Italy for a year.

She remembers how for a few months before she left she stayed in a furnished room in Grotto Road near the university to prepare for her school leaving exams which she had missed while she was in hospital. The only person she saw in those months was Charles, who used to arrive unannounced outside her window, heave himself up and drop onto her bed. It would only be a question of a few minutes. He would take her there, where she lay, in silence, and then straighten his clothes and climb back out of the window. As soon as the exams were done, she was driven to the airport and put on board an Alitalia flight via Kinshasa to Italy.

He glances at the clock. She sighs

- Yes, I know, time to go.

She walks silently into the room and sits down. He sits and lights a cigarette and waits.

- You know, for two years I was silent. Silent when I got to Rome.

She remembers staring out of the window as the airplane landed in Rome and taxied towards its terminus buildings. End of the line. It was a cold day at the end of February 1970. She was seventeen. She was completely alone.

- My mother had arranged for me to spend a week in Rome sightseeing before I caught the bus to Perugia. I was booked into the *Pensione Arcadia* near the *Villa Borghese* gardens. Anna hesitates again.

- *Hai detto la Pensione Arcadia? Lo stesso di ora.* The same place as everyone's talking about now, where the man was murdered?

She nods.

- Yes, nothing has changed.

Outside the airport was an empty taxi rank. She remembers feeling silly and conspicuous, standing there with her suitcase next to her, waiting. A man, leaning against a wall, grinned.

- "*Ci ha da aspettare. Fino alle cinque non passano piu'.*"

She remembers she looked at him without understanding.

- "*Ah, straniera! No taxi. Taxi sciopero.* After five o'clock, maybe. *Capisci? Strike.*"

He came closer.

- "Where you going?" he asked.

She pulled out the address and showed him.

- "Come. I take you".

She remembers trying to think of what she should do but it didn't seem as if there was any alternative if there was a strike, so she nodded, yes.

They loaded her large Samsonite suitcase onto the back seat of the tiny custard-coloured *Cinquecento*, since it would not fit into the boot, and then squeezed themselves into the front. He sped out of the *piazzale* and onto a country road flanked by huge advertising placards. She eyed her companion. He grinned back and changed into a lower gear. Then casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, his hand slid off the gear lever and onto her knee. And still he grinned. She looked at the hand, square, strong, with tufts of hair growing from the fleshy parts. Fingernails cut short but not too clean. As she looked, the hand began to move, to knead and squeeze her flesh. Then it shifted upwards and inwards. He looked at her quickly, saw no opposition, and turned the car off the road into an

abandoned lot. He parked amongst the nettles next to a graffiti-covered wall, and unbuttoned his fly. He put his hand on her neck and pushed her face down. Her eye caught the words, *Christ is King*, as she went.

- He dropped me off a few hours later in front of the *Pensione Arcadia*.

She checked in, trying to hide the abrasions on her lips and face from the curious eyes of the manager who accompanied her to her room, eyeing her legs as she walked.

For a few days the hotel became her home, while she waited for the week's holiday to come to an end. And like home, it was not a safe place, and so it felt familiar. She didn't unpack her suitcase, knowing that soon she would be moving on.

- Each time I came back, he was there waiting for me, the hotel manager, and accompanied me to my room. He had taken to coming inside, using his skeleton key, after checking that no-one, especially not his wife, was looking. He would tell me to wash myself first in the bidet, I remember. I remember feeling dirty. It was a quick, silent business, over in a few minutes with only a minimum disturbance of clothing, and then he was gone. I lay on the bed where he left me, curled up with my eyes closed.

- But every morning I felt obliged to get up and pretend to exist. Like when I was a child and got up to go to school every day, no matter what had happened in the night. When I emerged onto the street the man in the custard coloured *Cinquecento* was always waiting for me outside the door. We didn't return to the abandoned lot. Once we went to the woods and lay on the damp ground, and the sun shone through the floating golden chestnut leaves as they fell silently to earth. Another time he took me to a tiny flat which I understood he had borrowed from a friend. Sometimes he brought a friend. Sometimes two. I went where he took me. Without saying a word. And in the afternoon I came back to the ministrations of the manager.

She stops, blankly, then continues in a monotone.

- If his wife was there, he would take me out for a drive. I remember how one day we sat in the car beneath the stands of the *Teatro Olimpico* along the banks of the Tiber, near the *Parrioli*, just past the *Ministero degli Esteri*. His beard was rough under the rough cement arches; it tore the skin around my mouth.

- You know, I really don't understand men. What pleasure could there be in that?

- *Mi viene da pensare che a suo posto un'altra persona odierrebbe gli uomini, non e` vero?*

Anyone else in your place would hate men?

She doesn't say anything. But it makes her wonder.

- Do you think I hate men?

He blinks, and waits.

- No. Maybe that was premature, he says.

She decides it's better to leave this and move on.

She remembers how on the last day she realized she was bleeding, her mouth was swollen and bruised, her skin grazed. The man in the *cinquecento* took her to the bus-stop and left her there next to her suitcase. She had not eaten for a week. She had been too afraid and ashamed to go into a shop or restaurant and order food.

The bus took three hours to reach its destination, climbing higher and higher into the Appenines. It began to snow, covering everything with a soft veil of white. It was dark by the time the bus pulled in to the main square and stopped. She remembers alighting with the other passengers and collecting her suitcase. And then she fainted in the snow.

She breathes deeply.

- I suppose I had reached my limit.

A shop keeper carried her into his shop which sold ecclesiastical accoutrements. She remembers coming to consciousness surrounded by statues of saints and golden crucifixes and vestments and habits for priests and nuns. He called a taxi, and she was taken to Signora Bruna's.

She falls silent lost in memories.

- *Vedo che e' ora. Continuiamo domani.*

She gets up.

She stands at the door, reluctant to come in. He waits. At last she sits down and stares out of the window. When he sees her eyes return to the room, he asks:

- *Dove sei?* Where did your thoughts go?

She sighs.

- I didn't study Italian. How could I study Italian? I couldn't speak any language.

- Slowly, after many months, I don't remember how, I found my way to the *Accademia di Belle Arti*, the university art school, housed in a thirteenth century Franciscan convent with high vaulted windows looking out over the hills to infinity. And there, silently, I began to make shapes in clay. At first I destroyed everything I made. Then I began to shape a



woman's head. Day after day I went and worked on it, moulding and pressing it until the professor told me it was done. I should cast it in bronze.

She thinks back. Such good work, the slow remaking of a life. She remembers how she began to talk to him, a few halting words in Italian. *Grazie. Come faccio? Grazie*, speaking of grace. Then more. She remembers how slowly she learned to speak again. The new words, the Italian words, felt clean. Golden. Usable. Safe. It was like the brimming over of a golden liquid. She rejoiced in this new language, in its wonderful crisp sounds the meaning of which still often evaded her. *Cinquecento-cinquanta-cinque, Terontola, Castruccio Castracane*.

- I never learnt it formally, as a comparison to another language, finding parallels in grammar and meaning. No. It was something separate. I learnt it in the street, as it were, pointing to something I was told its name and that became it. *Mela* had no connection to the word apple and all its implications. It was just a fruit. And it tasted and smelt of *mela*. My two worlds were separate. Even today I find it almost impossible to translate from English to Italian and vice versa.

She remembers how slowly she learned to seek out the other, or at least not to withdraw, like a sea anemone, at the touch of a hand. Dust. Clay. Mud. Remaking herself.

- And here I discovered Dante. And through him I heard echoes of Eliot shifting through myself. And I thought of home for the first time.

- Ah Dante. *In mezzo al camino...*

- Yes, yes - she interrupts him quickly. But that's not what I want to talk about. I want to get to the end of this story.

- One day I remember walking out and the grass was green. Green, so startlingly green and beautiful it made me gasp. I didn't know there was so much beauty in the world. It was just a scruffy patch of grass on the side of a road, I remember, edging out from dirty melting snow, but I remember it as one of the most important turning points of my life.

She stops and thinks.

That was the year that the Italian Communist Party almost won the elections. It was also the year Italy won the world cup.

She remembers how life felt infinitely interesting. She decided she wanted to understand things. She registered for a long distance degree in Anthropology and Psychology through the University of South Africa and studied Arabic and Zulu in Italy.

At the same time she applied to study Philosophy at the University of Bologna and was

accepted on condition that she passed a language test in Italian first. There was a choice of Ancient, Medieval or Modern Philosophy. She chose Ancient because she thought she would have enough background for that. She remembers her first lecture – it was on Plato's Republic and she was sure she would cope, having read the Penguin paperback edition of the Socratic dialogues after lights-out at boarding school under her blankets with the aid of a torch.

She remembers how the whole lecture was conducted in ancient Greek. She remembers the students asked questions in Greek and read from their books in Greek. She didn't understand a word. At some point, the professor noticed that she was struggling and turned to her in Italian and kindly tried to include her by asking her about the South African republic. He asked her about the constitution. She remembers her embarrassment at having to explain that South Africa didn't have one. It was her first shuddering awareness of how limited her education had been.

- I applied for a transfer to Modern Philosophy instead.

She remembers friends. She remembers a boyfriend from Libya who was studying medicine in Bologna. Hadi was his name. She spent three, maybe four years with him. She met him in 1971, just after Qadaffi had come to power and had set up a bursary scheme for poorer students to study abroad.

She remembers how he renamed her; how for the three or four years she lived with him she became Samira, no longer Anna. It is strange how she was happy to adapt and shift her identity to match other people's needs. To please them. When she thinks back, it seems to be something she has often done.

- Always trying to please. It bothers me a bit now. This question of names and naming and language. As if the label had no importance. As if there is a reality below language which is where I exist.

He looks at her penetratingly but doesn't comment.

She sighs.

- I wish you wouldn't just look at me like that. I suppose you don't really understand. I suppose you can't. How could you? You live a middle class life with middle class values safely here with your comfortable suburban wife and children. In your world things are stable and a name refers always to the same thing. It's not the same in mine.

He looks at her with a half smile.

- So you think I can't understand? *Così' credi?*

He opens his hands.

- *Continua!*

She remembers learning Quranic Arabic and applying to the Al Ahzar university in Cairo to study letters and being turned down because she was not Muslim. She remembers feeling relieved. She remembers asking the South African consul in Rome if her boyfriend could apply for a visa to visit Cape Town. She remembers how the consul explained that the application would have to go via Pretoria and that its success would depend on whether he looked dark-skinned or light-skinned in the photo. He explained that there was no automatic racial classification for Arabs; while the Chinese were coloured, the Japanese were honorary white, and the Turks were white, Arabs went on a case by case basis.

She laughs.

She remembers the feeling of belonging, of being part of his group of friends but also of being excluded at the same time, because of course she wasn't one of them and couldn't speak their language, and they were all male – she was the only girl. She remembers eating *bukbuk* nearly every night, sitting on the ground in a circle, and the drumming and the clapping and singing afterwards. She remembers how they were treated with hostility by many Italians who called them *Turchi* or *Marocchini* and wouldn't let them an apartment or trust them in any way.

- I remember driving around with them at night, sitting in the back seat of the car with my face covered, to the streets where the prostitutes worked. They took delight in asking the women the price of their services, but it never went any further than that, at least while I was in the car.

She thinks back to Bologna. It was different from the Italy she had known until now. It was dry, witty, practical, interested in reality rather than mysticism. She attended lectures in the Faculty of Philosophy, but when she was free she also attended lectures in the school of Medicine with Hadi. Everything interested her. She remembers going to an anatomy lecture and watching the professor and his assistants dissect a large bloated human body that was turning green and purple in places.

She hesitates.

- After we had been together for about a year he asked me to marry him. I remember knowing that I didn't want to, but didn't know how to say no. I remember when one of our

friends, Juma'a, married us by Muslim rite in his basement apartment. I remember hating myself for thinking that it didn't count.

- Tell me Doctor, am I a bigamist? I remember I had a friend once who had left a wife in America and had married an Italian woman. He was a bigamist and could no longer enter the United States. Is that what I am?

He grunts.

- *Tu che ne dici?*

- Do you never answer a question?

He smiles and blinks. Then blinks again.

- You see, these memories just keep coming, they're confused. Does any of that stuff have any meaning at all?

She looks at him carefully.

- Aren't you bored yet?

- *No. Continua.*

- Well, then I moved to Milan.

He lifts his eyebrows, then his eyes flit almost imperceptibly to the clock.

- Ok, I get the message. I'll tell you about that tomorrow.

The usual room, the usual time.

It was a dark cold November evening in Milano. Shop lights reflecting dully yellow and oily on the wet cobbles. Fog touching the skin, reaching up into the sleeves of her sheepskin jacket. She had come up from Bologna on the afternoon train and booked into a cheap *pensione* near the consulate, where she would go to write an exam the next morning, then returned to the street to find somewhere to eat. She remembers peering into two restaurants but they looked formal and expensive. Then she noticed, across the street, between racing taxis, a *trattoria*. She crossed over and pushed open the doors. Warmth and good smells and a buzz of conversation spilled out into the street.

She stepped inside and looked around. Simple, unpretentious, but full. Every table was taken. On the far side she saw a woman sitting alone at a table, and, tired from the journey and reluctant to go back out into the cold, she crossed the room and asked if she would mind if they shared. The woman smiled and pulled out a chair. She sat down. They fell into light conversation.

She stretches and then settles her hands in her lap again.

It feels like so long ago. But her mind is drawn back to that night, something about it unresolved still, needing redefinition. They chatted idly, chance acquaintances in a big city. Then suddenly he arrived. She was embarrassed, an intruder, she motioned to get up and leave them alone, they pressed her to stay. She stayed. The conversation flowed and rippled around the table, playfully, flirtatiously, she could feel the sexual undertow drawing her in; she allowed it, curious to see where it would go. At midnight the *trattoria* closed, he invited the two women to his house for a drink, they exchanged glances, accepted.

She remembers how the *portinaia* stuck her head out briefly as they stood waiting for the ancient lift to stagger to a halt on the ground floor, saw him, nodded and withdrew. They laughed as the lift carried them up. They alighted and he opened the door.

She closes her eyes.

- I wonder if it was the beauty of the apartment that made me stay. High ceilings, frescoes, walls covered with a dazzling collection of modern art – I recognized works by Modigliani, de Chirico, Guttuso, mixed with rococo portraits of ancestors, a *monsignore*, a bishop – colours, shapes, insinuating, surrounding, holding. I realized I had unexpectedly walked into one of the most refined corners of the European intelligentsia. I felt like Ali Baba must have when the door opened into the treasure cave.

She pauses a moment, thinking. Would she have married him if he had lived in an ordinary apartment and led an ordinary life? The question keeps bothering her, pulling at the edges of her consciousness.

She forces her thoughts back to that night. It feels important to keep remembering.

- We talked and talked. At last I told them I must go. The invitation to go further was there, but I withdrew and it was fine. They accompanied me back to my hotel.

- When I got back to my room I realized I had left my umbrella in his apartment. So after my meeting at the consulate the next morning, I went back, expecting to find only the *portinaia* and hoping to be able to persuade her to recover the umbrella. But he was there, had taken the day off work.

He was delighted to see her and invited her in. Prepared a salad and omelette for their lunch. They sat in the kitchen with the scent of cooking in the air and drank wine from *Orvieto*, and the conversation meandered and they talked about art, and politics, and he showed her his lithographs by Tono Brancanaro of the prostitutes of Padua, the *Belle del*

*Pra`* whose eyes watched her knowingly. And he showed her the heavy oak armoire with the hastily scribbled message across the inside of the door – *Oggi il diciassettesimo giorno di novembre 1632 al tocco e mezzo e` morto il parrocco, Don Luigi Sforza*. She agreed not to go back to Bologna until the next day so that he could show her around Milano. Late in the afternoon Laura arrived from work. Somehow, over more food and wine and laughter, they found themselves in bed together. All three. She decided not to go back to Bologna the next day either.

- But eventually I had to leave.

She remembers how he wrote to her. Letters on green paper in green ink. She has never forgotten the strangeness of finding the green envelopes in her letter box covered in his spidery untidy handwriting. She remembers checking the box several times a day. He wrote that she must return. He told her this was something out of the ordinary. He mentioned Nietzsche. *Al di la` del Bene e del Male*. Beyond Good and Evil.

She remembers how a few weeks later she travelled to Paris. And stopped over in Milano to change trains. He was waiting for her at the station.

And now it was just the two of them. And a deeper undertow, something inexpressible was between them, an intensity that seemed to underscore every word. Often their eyes met and held. And he talked, about history, about his family, about literature, and she listened intently. He didn't notice that she didn't talk about herself. She didn't tell him she was married. She mentioned a boyfriend in Bologna. They left the bed only to fetch some fruit, *panettone*, a glass of wine. He asked her to come and live with him. She agreed. They had met twice.

- But back in Bologna Hadi wept and begged me not to leave, and eventually I gave in. And I sent a letter to Milan, calling it all off.

She remembers those grey days after Christmas in the student apartment in Bologna, when she wondered whether she had made a huge mistake. She remembers trying to focus on the figure she was sculpting but her head was empty. There was a knock at the door, she opened. He stood there holding an enormous bunch of flowers in his arms.

- *Molto romantico*.

- I wonder why he chose chrysanthemums of all flowers. I've never liked them. The Italians call them *i fiori dei morti* – the flowers of the dead. Perhaps because they bloom in November when people visit their dead in the cemeteries. He told me he had come to fetch

me. It was not a question. I couldn't say no. I packed a small overnight bag and my collected works of Shakespeare and left a note on the kitchen table for Hadi:

"I am sorry. Goodbye."

She remembers how she left behind everything, her motor-bike, her books and records, her memories, her life.

She often wondered what she would have chosen to do if both he and Hadi had stopped putting pressure on her and had left the choice to her. She thinks she would have gone with him. But she wasn't asked.

She sighs.

- And so I moved in with him. He knew nothing at all about me.

She remembers how they walked out that evening in Milano, around the *Castello Sforzesco*, in the misty cold night air. He told her about the war, about how the Germans used to execute captured partisans up against the wall here in the moat. He showed her the bullet holes in the brickwork; she touched the tiny cavities with her fingers, softly, softly, like a tongue touching the sore bloodied place where a tooth has been lost. Her threadbare corduroy coat was too light for this far north; she felt the cold creeping up her sleeves. He told her about his ancestors, merchants of Venice, about his grandfather, professor at one of the oldest universities in Europe. He told her about the war. He told her about the Great Betrayer, *il Traditore*, Mussolini, his dead body hung upside-down by the feet in *Piazzale Loreto* with his lover Clara Petacci. And the rawness of the fierce anger and hatred of the people of Milan

He crosses his legs, uncrosses them and then crosses them again, lights a cigarette, but resists the temptation to say anything.

- And I remember how foreign and rootless I felt.

She pauses, and then continues.

- You know, thinking about it now, he refashioned me to fit his needs. But I was happy to become whatever he wanted me to be. I had no clear idea who I was or what I wanted from life. I was willing to be moulded, shaped, like a ball of clay.

He told her she would need clothes. They went to an atelier overlooking the *Duomo* where they sat on a sofa sipping wine while the assistants brought item after item for them to view. He selected four outfits.

"It's a start", he said.

She remembers how he taught her to cook, standing behind her to help her stir, his body cupped against hers so tight that there was nothing between them, close like a limpet against a rock, while the scent of garlic and basil overwhelmed her senses.

She remembers how at times they felt like companions, like two male friends out on the town. She remembers on one occasion ending up in a bordello and sharing a woman after the revelries of the night. She remembers their laughter. Nothing seemed impossible. She would have done anything for him, become anything he wanted.

Everything seemed exciting, colours were brighter than she had ever known them, flavours and smells overpowering. It felt like, and she supposes was in a way, a very special life. Yes, that word again. He shared everything with me; it felt as if she must die without him.

He waits.

She remembers accompanying him on hunting trips to Hungary and Serbia and Bosnia and the Soviet Union. He nominated her bearer and she walked behind carrying spare guns, ammunition, cognac. He gave her a bunch of leather thongs bound together on a hook to hang on her belt. Each thong ended in a tiny noose which fitted around the necks of the birds he had shot. Ducks, geese, doves, blackbirds, songbirds, woodcocks, snipe. She remembers the softness and warmth of the bodies brushing against her thigh as she walked.

She lets her thoughts wander idly back to Milan.

She remembers how those years were known as *gli anni di piombo* in Italy, the lead years. Heavy, grey, unrelenting.

She looks at him.

- Do you remember that? Do you remember the shootings? Gambizzzare they called it, to leg or be legged, when the Red Brigades would shoot anyone they considered enemies of the people in the knees? To cripple them. She remembers when one of their neighbours was shot in the street outside their house. He was a bank manager. There must have been fifty police cars. They couldn't get to work that day. And when the Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and held hostage for a month and eventually executed.

- Remember those days?

She sighs

She remembers when she was interrogated by the *Carabinieri* because one of her friends



was suspected of being a *Brigatista*.

And she remembers the student revolts. She remembers the smell of teargas, almost every day, the looting which was called proletarian redistribution. Even though she had dreamed about it for years, she didn't join in although she was a student. She just didn't feel part of it. She remembers one of the protesters being crushed to death by a tram while she was riding in it. The driver made everyone lie down on the floor because of the cross fire and the Molotov's that were flying over their heads. She remembers another student was shot dead by the police that same day.

A starling lands on a branch outside the window and looks at her with its shiny black eyes, turning its head from side to side to scrutinise her better.

She remembers the leader of *the Marxist Leninist Communist Party*, Aldo Brandirali, staying with them for a few weeks while he rewrote Marx's *Capital*. She remembers his intensity, the hungry coldness of his smile.

She remembers a party where her father-in-law pulled out a gun and threatened the poet and Nobel prize laureate for literature, Eugenio Montale, for his reactionary views. She remembers how her husband calmly went up and disarmed him. – *Dai Papa`, non essere cosi`* he said. – Come on, don't be like that. Give me the gun. And his father gave him the gun.

She remembers going to *La Scala* as the guest of Ghiringhelli, the superintendent. She remembers giving him a lift home afterwards and sitting in the car in the dark with him while he told them about his visit to Moscow to engage the Bolshoi ballet for *La Scala*, and about an invitation to dinner with Khrushchev.

She notices him watching her.

- I'm not thinking anything profound. My thoughts are just swirling around. Old memories. Meaningless mostly.

The years in South Africa, the hospitals, the depression felt like something from another life, remote. Yet of course they weren't. They were there, underlying it all.

- I suppose I had always known that at some point I would have to tell him about my past. But it never seemed to be the right time, and he didn't seem curious to know about me at all.

- Of course I knew all about his childhood, and you know, it's strange, it was almost as if his memories became my memories. How is that possible? Memory is who you are. You

can't have someone else's memories. I almost didn't exist. I had almost reached a point of cancelling my memories.

- And the longer I waited, the more difficult it became. And I didn't know what I could tell him either that would make sense. I didn't understand it much myself.

She sighs.

She remembers thinking that at some point it was no longer possible for her to tell him about her past. That the window of opportunity had come and gone.

Occasionally someone would ask her why she had left South Africa, and she always struggled to answer. She had no words to describe what she had been through, and no understanding of it either. Why had she had shock therapy? Why had she been in a psychiatric hospital? Was she mad? People often assumed that there must be political motives behind her choice, but that felt untrue. She was not an activist and she was not in exile. It felt as if the reason she had left went much deeper than politics, that it was somehow embedded in the South African reality beyond politics. It felt that even if power shifted in South Africa, she would still find it difficult to live there. Eventually she found it was easier to just avoid the question and pass for British. She looked British, her accent sounded English, and if anyone asked where exactly she came from it was easy enough to talk about London. But it felt like another level of falsehood. And another layer of confusion about who she was.

And there were moments when the darkness came back. She hid them as well as she could so that they passed unobserved. But she couldn't understand some of the things she did. She had sexual fantasies that she couldn't share with him and that she couldn't even think about to herself.

Even then, she thinks, even at that time of greatest intimacy, when it felt as if they shared everything, she found she couldn't. She needed to hide parts of herself that felt too raw, too shameful, too private, too vulnerable. And there was her need for privacy, her need to withdraw even from him. There was a level where he did not exist, where she would not let him in, where she was totally alone. It was a perversely sexual, autistic sort of place.

She hesitates.

- Isn't it strange that I am telling you these things Doctor, that I'm letting you into that place. Where I wouldn't allow even my husband? I couldn't share these things with him. I don't know why. So I don't know why I am showing them to you, sharing them with you.

Will you judge me for it if I tell you about them?

- *Come lo giudichi tu?* How do you judge it?

She falls silent.

- I hate these things about myself. I feel so destructive. It's hard and shameful to tell you some of these things.

- Mmm.

- What happened to those moments of excitement and intimacy? he asks.

- I don't know. It felt as if they must go on forever? But they didn't.

She thinks.

She remembers little disappointments. Little betrayals. Slight rejections that felt unbearable, and then were forgiven. But not completely. So that a sensitivity to new rejections remained.

She remembers when she noticed he was coming home late from work and she knew there was another woman. He joked about her, a tall blonde German girl with the longest legs he had ever seen who kept coming to his office for private meetings wearing miniskirts that got shorter and shorter. She remembers wondering why he didn't bring her home and they could all go to bed together. Or he could have told her about it and she would have accepted that he wanted this woman by himself. She could have tolerated that. But it was the secrecy that hurt. That he would not share this with her.

There, in the secrecy, in the lack of sharing, was the betrayal. She was excluded. They were no longer one single being. It was as if now they were two people again and it felt painful to her to be so separate and rejected and unwanted. Even though she had always kept part of herself separate.

- Perhaps all couples go this way, don't they? After the first few years of love have passed?

- Perhaps other people tolerate it better?

- I had become a provider of meals, the organizer of his household, a body to satisfy his passing fantasies.

- But it wasn't just that. I would have been happy to provide for him in that way if only he had still wanted me.

- But he would grow irritable if I didn't satisfy his needs at once. He blamed me for everything that wasn't working in his life.

- I tried to make things better for him. I put aside my needs. I took on a second job to be able to afford the things he said he deserved. I cut his toenails and cooked him three-course meals every day. And still he wasn't satisfied.

- The betrayals grew more frequent.

- But even so, Doctor, I wouldn't have left.

She remembers withdrawing. Falling more silent. Withdrawing each day a little further. Closing in on herself.

And then one day she summoned the courage to talk, to tell him about her past.

- Oh, just little bits of it, you understand, not the whole story as I'm telling it to you now. I told him about my father. I told him about the shock treatment. I told him about the psychiatric ward. I didn't tell him about Charles, or the men in Rome. Or about my marriage.

- It was as if I had to show him that I existed. If I had a past, I existed. I wasn't just a figment of his imagination.

- I thought it might help him to understand, I thought perhaps we would be able to recover the closeness we had once had.

- But he was cruel. He told me he felt cheated. He told me he would never have married me if he had known. He said he would write to the newspapers and expose me. He even pushed me one day.

- I remember how one day we sat at the dinner table with friends, and I saw him lift his finger to his temple and make that circular movement that means crazy, means mad, means *mal*, and point at me.

- Doctor, I think maybe I did go mad at that point.

- I think I could have tolerated anything else, but not that. I'm not sure why. Perhaps I had always been afraid of that.

- And I wished he were dead.

- I wished it with all my heart.

- I remember one day I came home and he was cleaning his guns on the kitchen table. He had laid out newspapers to protect the surface, and had neatly arranged the gun oil and soft cloths and instruments that he needed at one end.

- I asked him if he wanted some tea.

- Can't you see I'm busy, he said.

- Doctor, he spoke to me abruptly. I didn't answer. I started to cry.

- *Che c'è?* he asked. *Piangi sempre*. You're always crying.

- Doctor, you don't know me. But I never cry.

He swore at me. His face turned red and spit gathered on his lips. He was holding the gun in one hand. He made that gesture again, Doctor, the circular one, with the gun instead of the finger pointing at his temple.

- I went to my bedroom and lay down on the bed. I put my hands together across my chest, Doctor, the way I had been taught to do when I was a little girl. And I said the words of the prayer I had learned and forgotten and which now came flowing back to me.

In this little bed I lie

Heavenly Father hear my cry

Please make him die.

I packed an overnight bag, took my collected works of Shakespeare, and left.

- *Così, senza dire niente?*

- Yes, I just left. With my overnight bag and my collected works of Shakespeare.

- *E poi?*

- I wandered for a while.

And then I came to the island.

## BOOK 2

### The Present of Things Present

Here is a place of disaffection  
Time before and time after  
In a dim light

T.S. Eliot – Burnt Norton

I have said this before. I am not sure any more how I ended up here on the island. I think I came to see the ruins and forgot to go back. The local school needed an English teacher and I was asked to stand in until the Ministry in Rome appointed someone.

But that was twenty years ago.

I have lived all these years in uncertainty, knowing only that any day the real teacher may arrive. In the meantime a cheque has been deposited into my account each month. It is not much, but then I haven't had many needs except for paper and ink to carry on this endless dialogue with myself.

The islanders call me *l'Inglese*, the English woman, although I have not spent more than a few months in England in my whole life. They are kind enough to me, but I am aware that they speak more slowly to me than they do amongst themselves, as if I were a slightly retarded child. I know it is out of kindness that they do it, yet I have wished at times that they wouldn't and that I could just be one of them.

I suspect that they are puzzled by me, that implicit in the name *l'Inglese* is a sense also of *la Pazza*, the mad woman, although they would never call me that to my face. I think I do not make much sense to them, simple as they are, but then perhaps I do not make much sense to myself either. I am always here like them, I get up every day at the same time, breathe the same air, eat the same food, yet I have no common purpose with them. I have not tried to explain where I come from, and I think they would not understand if I did. To them Africa is what you can see across the straits on a clear day. It doesn't connect with an eccentric Englishwoman in any way. To their knowledge I have no past – or family either. I have sometimes wondered what the islanders would do if I died, as at some point I suppose I must.

I am always filled with a yearning for something I can't put my finger on or understand. At times the pain is so great that I wish I were a man and could pay a woman to hold me for a few hours, to make it pass. My body longs to be held and comforted, to know the warmth and softness of touch. And after a while I began to realise that it doesn't make much difference whether one is a man or a woman.

I have on occasion, after payday at the end of the month, left the island and, in the anonymous back streets of a big city by night, found the courage to approach a woman and offer her money to spend the night with me. It is not about sex, you understand, although of course there is that too. But it is when the pain of being alone grows so great that it threatens to overwhelm me. We rent for the night, for the space of a few hours, a small room in a nearby *pensione* under the cynical scrutiny of the concierge and climb the dusty stairs to the small room. A high bed that must have belonged to someone's grandmother, a washbasin and bidet, a crucifix on the wall – the bare essentials for living and dying. From the walls come the groans and sighs of others like me who find the indifference of the universe too much to bear, who are trying to find temporary respite. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it is just about the bodily itch?

I have found a woman who suits my needs well enough. Sabrina she calls herself, although I am sure that is not her real name. The transaction is quick and shameful and money changes hands – the price includes the room. She shows no interest in me, asks no questions. We slip naked between the sheets in the light that filters through the shutters from the streetlamps. The understanding is clear. She is willing to share her body with me for a few hours, that is all. At first she felt she must perform, give me my money's worth. Now she just holds me close. Sometimes there is release. Sometimes just the holding is enough.

Sometimes when it is over I feel her eyes on me in the mirror as she tidies her hair and prepares to leave, but she never tries to breach the distance now that our bodies have separated. She works well on the level of bodies. Knows how to satisfy their longings.

I catch the first ferry back to the island in the early light of morning, bundled up against the cold and damp. I watch the gulls swoop and dive in our wake, the first rays of sunlight reflecting off their wings as they rise, while we below are still caught in darkness and the mainland slips slowly off the horizon. I go straight from the harbour to school.

## Friday 26 October

As I hurry to my classroom, the school secretary, Sig. Cappi, stops me and hands me a letter. Without looking at it I push it roughly into my briefcase. By 8 a.m. I am in front of the class of sleepy island children, trying to explain the difference between the present perfect tense in English and the *passato prossimo* in Italian. Each of us isolated, encapsulated in his own little world of meaning. Outside the classroom windows the island beckons to them. I can see their eyes reach out longingly to the places where they explore and play, full and complete in their growth.

The morning trundles on as usual and I try to put the letter from my mind, but I am aware of its presence pulling each time I get up and distance myself from it to write on the chalkboard. The children are quiet, as if they, like the branches on the vines on this autumn morning, feel the sap ebbing in their limbs. They sit at their desks, separate, each absorbed in the slow inner functions of their organs, the secretions, the seepages, the rhythmic contractions and releases, the passage of sludge through the system. I see that it will not be much use to try and do any work with them unless their life forces can be quickened in some way so I devise a game, noticing as I do that Ugo is on the edge as usual. He stands holding his desk with two fingers, half turned from the others with his large frightened eyes, longing for inclusion yet fearing it at the same time.

At the end of the lesson I hold him back, a lumbering ungainly boy who is struggling with the abstractions of schoolwork. He waits by the blackboard, a hint of panic in his eyes as he moves his weight heavily from foot to foot. I invite him to sit down, and sit near him. I can sense his fear, smell the nervous perspiration as it breaks out on his body.

- How are things going, Ugo?

He shrugs.

- How's everything at home? Your mother? Father

His eyes move nervously across the desk and with his thick fingers he plays with a scrap of rubber from an eraser.

- Your marks in English are not very good. I suppose you know. How are you doing in your other subjects?

I wonder why I am subjecting him to this. It doesn't feel necessary and I am beginning to wish I could get out of it.

- Are there any problems?



I see his shoulders begin to shake. He pushes the chair back with his knees and stands up.

- *Debbo andare* – he says.

He lumbers out of the room.

I sit down at my desk, open my bag and pull out the letter. I examine the envelope carefully, official manila brown with *Polizia di Stato* printed in black across the top, and my name in sloping letters below. There is a red stamp, *Urgente*, across the side. I replace it in my bag and gaze out of the classroom window. From where I sit I can see out over the now fallow fields behind the village where empty dry husks of corn lie untidy on the hard ground. A few vineyards straggle along the edges of the fields. The small sour grapes they yielded now lie fermenting in barrels beneath the houses. There is a sense of sadness in the island at this time of the year. The sea changes colour, becomes dark and opaque, and the first wild storms of winter keep the ferries from entering the harbour. The tables in the piazza where people sat eating and laughing until late are stored, piled up neatly in a back room for next summer. An unshaven man gazes out of a steamed-up bar window at the waves that crash against the harbour wall, then focuses again on the soccer results in the *Gazzetta dello Sport*.

I see Ugo again in the afternoon as I am walking home after school. He is helping at the vegetable stall in the marketplace, counting and weighing vegetables in a rusty old-fashioned hand scale. He sees me coming and withdraws to the far side of the square. I go up to the stall-keeper, a large muscular man in torn blue overalls and a shaven head and heavy boots.

- *Mi dica?*

I give him my order and, as he is putting it together, I comment that he is lucky to have his son working with him today.

- *Ma che! Non e` figlio nostro* – his wife breaks in, a battered looking woman with peroxidized hair – *e` figlio di mio fratello*. Our nephew. *Capisce? Suo papa` lavora a Milano*. I thank them and pay.

I return to the tiny apartment I rent from Sig.ra Bruna, a gaunt, spare woman of indefinable age who runs her establishment near the harbour in the old part of town and lives next door. The entrance leads off an alley and up a steep flight of steps to my door. A large room with a kitchen table and two chairs in the middle and a bed against one wall. Uneven red flagged floor. A worn armchair before the deep shuttered window that looks

out onto the rooftops and the sea beyond. A two-plate gas cooker. A sink. A fridge. A tiny bathroom. There is a sign on the back of the bathroom door that reads:

**Rules of the house:**

No television or radio.

No noise after 8 p.m. and before 7 a.m.

One hot bath a week. One cold shower a day.

Rent to be paid strictly one month in advance on the first day of the month.

Thirty days notice required.

My window overlooks the harbour sideways on. I have placed my armchair beside it so that I can note the time of arrival and departure of the ferries, the changes in shift of the *Carabinieri* and the *Guardie di Finanza*, the return of the fishing vessels, each year with less and less fish.

I climb the steep narrow staircase to my apartment and close the door behind me. I throw my bag onto the kitchen table, and as I do I remember the letter. I pull it out and examine it again. It is addressed to me.

*Gentilissima Signorina*

*Anna P.*

*C/o Scuola Media Guglielmo Marconi*

*Via Vincenzo de Luca*

*0427 Ponza*

I turn it over. The address on the back is: *Polizia di Stato, Questura di Roma, Via San V.* I drop it onto the table and make myself a cup of tea, but while the kettle is boiling I pull the letter back towards myself and tear it open with the end of my teaspoon. I draw out the single sheet of paper. I'm not sure why but I feel my heart beating.

It's just a few lines, from a certain *Ispettore Lupo*, at the police headquarters in Rome informing me that I need to come to the *Questura* urgently and bring all my documents with me. He does not explain why. I neatly fold the page and return it to its envelope and put it on top of the fridge making sure to align it with the edge.

I take some birdseed off the shelf and feed my little songbird, my *cardellino*, in her cage, trying to put the letter from my mind. I bought her at a Saturday morning market in the capital a few weeks ago where she was on sale as a decoy for hunters. She is a fearful little

thing, and I am not sure yet whether she can sing or not. She hasn't made a sound so far. Some do, some don't. I have hung the cage by the window in my room, from where she can see the hills and the sea.

I carry my tea over to the window and sit down in my armchair with my notebook and pen and my school bag. I have started writing to try and fill these interminable evenings that are now drawing in, growing darker and darker and colder. But first I correct the small pile of homework the children have left me and prepare my lessons for the morning. Tomorrow, with the sixth grade, we will look at the definite article, *The*. I think this must be the twentieth time I have repeated the same lesson. A whole generation of children has passed through my hands in the meantime. In a year or so their children will be old enough to come to my class. The parents have grown up, married, often left the island to find work elsewhere. Their children have been left behind with their grandparents to repeat the cycle.

I sip my tea and gaze out of the window over the rooftops at the island below.

I wonder what *Ispettore* Lupo wants.

The swallows are flying low, zigzagging, criss-crossing the sky in search of the millions of invisible insects that must also be flying low as the barometer drops. I know this means they will soon be leaving on their long migration south. Perhaps some will go all the way to the Cape of Good Hope. I straighten up in my seat to watch them, half in love with their speed, their concise precise movement, the way they twist their tiny bodies at the last moment to avoid colliding with branches, masts, roofs, chimneys, and soar up and up into the sky.

### **Saturday 27 October**

It is a cold rainy day, the first real autumn day of the season. After school I come home and read. Eggs and salad for supper.

### **Sunday 28 October**

It is still raining.

### **Monday 29 October**

School. *Risotto* with mushrooms.

### **Tuesday 30 October**

This morning I am on playground duty at break. I pull a chair outside into the open air and sit in the shade against the classroom wall, steeling my eyes against the sharp sunlight, watching the children, ready to intervene if a fight breaks out, if someone grazes a knee.

They stamp and run and shout. The girls are playing in groups of twos or threes on the soft grass near the school building, imagining families and relationships, skipping and chasing each other. The boys, nearly all of them, are engaged as usual in a game of soccer on the sandy stretch of open ground behind the school building – they play football every break, usually with a ball made of a bundle of pages torn from the middle of an exercise book bound round and around with sticky tape.

My eye is caught by a movement on the ground at my feet. I bend down and see a wasp moving over an insect, a large moth. I can see the wasp holding it, see its abdomen connect and sting. The creature struggles then is still. I look up again. A few loners, or poorly coordinated boys hang unhappily on the fringes of the game, unwilling to lose face by joining the girls' games but uncomfortable in the rough and tumble of the soccer match. I see Simone, small for his age, pale faced with thick glasses held on with elastic around his head pushing a toy car around on the dusty ground, making vrooming noises in his throat. I see Ugo standing nearby watching him, his back to the fence, with his arms outstretched and his hands gripping the diamond wire mesh as if he had been crucified. I wonder what it would take to make him breach the distance, what would persuade him to risk rejection and join Simone in his play. He doesn't often join in with soccer, and I am used to seeing him separate, but this time it is different. He looks afraid. I am uncertain whether to approach him or not, not wanting to worsen his fear or discomfort, but reluctant to leave him there alone. I don't want to move out of my own solitude, but I find it almost impossible to just sit and watch. I wait a few minutes but when nothing changes, I get up and slowly, as if taking a stroll, begin to walk around the edge of the improvised soccer field.

As I watch, I see Leonardo and Matteo break away from the soccer game and say something to Ugo. I see his eyes shift away from them, his arms draw inwards and he pushes himself away from the fence. I see Leonardo laugh and shove his shoulder. I see Ugo's look of fear, his uncertainty. Leonardo pushes again and he stumbles, and now Matteo has shoved him from the other side and he falls, and I see the boys starting to kick his prostrate form. He does nothing to protect himself, he just lies there as the two boys kick him all over, and now the other children have noticed and are forming a circle around

them, egging them on as the kicking continues. I get up and go to the circle, shouting, but the noise is so loud that no-one hears me. I break through the ring of children at last and grab hold of Leonardo's arm. He is red in the face and his lips are drawn off his teeth in what looks like a smile. There is sudden silence and the circle begins to disintegrate. I tell Leonardo and Matteo that I want to see them. They must wait outside the classroom door in silence until I come.

I make sure that everyone has gone before I turn to Ugo. He picks himself up self-consciously. I feel irritated with him; I wish he were not so pathetic, that he would defend himself, value himself a little. I help to dust him off. His face is scratched and bleeding so I take him to the bathroom and wash his hands and face. Some of the cuts are quite deep. I realise I am going to have to take him to the secretary's office to have the wounds disinfected and bandaged. It is something I do not want to do. I tell him curtly to follow me. Sig. Cappi, the secretary, sits him down on one of the chairs reserved for visitors to the school and goes to the storeroom to fetch the first aid box, then returns and sits on the arm of the chair and gently dabs at the boy's face, talking to him soothingly and kindly as he does so, probing ever so gently into how he had got hurt. His eyes go from my face to Ugo's. The child does not speak but passively allows himself to be nursed. I am not sure what the procedure is but feel certain that I will have to make some kind of report at this point, to the headmaster, to the parents, to authority in general.

I return to the classroom where the two boys are waiting.

- So Leonardo, what was that all about?

He looks at me sullenly, and then averts his eyes.

- *Niente* – he mumbles.

- That wasn't nothing. I saw you push and kick him.

- *Era colpa sua. Cercava guai.*

- How could it be his fault? He was just standing there watching.

The boy stares stonily at the wall. I tell him to go and wait outside, and then call in Matteo. He is a softer, more pliable boy, I know.

- *Allora Matteo*, tell me what happened.

He bursts into tears. I watch the sobs racking his shoulders.

- *Non volevo, e' che ci guarda sempre, e Leo m'ha detto di dargli una lezione. E mi dispiace.*

- Sorry? Yes, well sorry is good. Would you be prepared to say sorry to Ugo?

- *Si Maestra.*

One at least is saved.

I send him back to his classroom. But I will have to deal further with Leonardo.

I watch the grub struggle then lie still as the wasp inserts its ovipositor into the flesh and begins to lay its eggs. Soon they will hatch and tiny maggots will begin to devour the living creature from the inside. It will die when they are ready to emerge into the world.

### **Wednesday 31 October**

I am in class, setting up for the next lesson when one of the girls from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade knocks on the door and enters shyly.

- *Mi manda il Segretario. C'è una telefonata.*

I lock the door of the classroom behind me and walk swiftly along the dark echoing passage to the secretary's office. He gestures towards the receiver lying on the counter. I pick it up.

- *Pronto. Chi parla?* Who's there?

- *Qui e' la Questura di Roma di Via San V.* This is *Ispettore Lupo* speaking. *Ha ricevuto la mia lettera?*

My voice trembles slightly as I answer.

-Yes, I received the letter.

- *Perche' non e' venuta?*

I can't think of anything to reply. Why hadn't I gone to see him as he had asked? My mind is blank. A shiver of apprehension runs through my body.

- *Deve presentarsi immediatamente in Questura.....*you must report to the police headquarters in Rome immediately.

- What is it about?

- *Lo sa Lei.* You must come at once. You know why.

- No I don't know. Please tell me.

- *Certo che lo sa.* You have received our letter.

I don't reply. His voice becomes mellifluous, persuasive.

- *Perche' non vuole venire?* Why don't you want to come? What are you hiding? *Che cosa nasconde?*

- I'm not hiding anything. Why do you need to see me? Can't you explain over the phone?

- *No, devi venire in Questura di persona, con i documenti.* You must come here in person. With your documents. Without delay.

- I can't come now. I am busy.

He waits for me to continue. At last I manage to mumble:

- I'll come on Friday afternoon, after school. I can't come before then.

- *Va bene. L'aspetto venerdì. Ma mi raccomando, non manchi.*

I replace the receiver carefully and softly in its cradle and return to my classroom.

### Thursday 1 November

Today is 1<sup>st</sup> November, All Saints' Day. *I Morti*. Feast of the Dead. Every year families prepare picnics of cold pasta and roast meats and vegetables and hard biscuits called *ossa dei morti*, bones of the dead, and spend the day at the cemetery, old people, parents, children, connecting the dead with the living. The day is festive, everyone dressed in their best, chatting with friends and relatives from distant parts of the island on the edge of the grave. There is a greater familiarity with death here than where I come from. Children grow up aware of those who have lived here before them, knowing that at some point they too will lie here in this consecrated ground while their descendents laugh and talk above their bodies. Yet even here things are changing and people leave the island and never come back and their bones are cremated and the ashes dispersed in places that do not know the weight of their tread.

There is no school because of the holiday. I set off early for a long walk, and then return to my little apartment. I know I have a pile of marking to do but I feel strangely restless and unable to settle down to anything. I sit at my window and try to read but I find myself reading the same sentence over and over again without being able to make any sense of it at all. At last I put down my book and just stare out of the window at the rooftops and the grey sea beyond. My thoughts flit aimlessly here and there, often returning to the same place and sparking the same reaction, then moving on like a butterfly, an insect. I think of work, of Ugo, of Leonardo and Matteo, of *Ispettore* Lupo, and I feel a sense of growing unease in my stomach. Tomorrow is Friday and I will have to go and see him. What is it he wants from me? What does he know about me? Then I think of dinner and what I will have

to eat at Modugno's. And then back to Ugo and Leonardo. At last I pull out some paper and my paints.

I clear the table so that I can work without worrying about knocking things over or messing them. I put down some sheets of newspaper and set out my paints and colours. For some time I have been obsessed with painting self-portraits of myself. I have hung them about my apartment and they now cover every surface and in places are doubled up even since there is nowhere else to hang them; small ones, large ones, in oils, in inks, in watercolours. The eyes follow me constantly, watching, judging. They are not soft, there is no compassion in this gaze I turn on myself.

Today too I feel a need to paint a self-portrait, to capture something about myself that doesn't feel very clear to my understanding, some microscopic shift. I hold a small mirror in my left hand and paint with the fingers of my right, trying to trace the lines, the darkness and light that I see reflected. I have begun to know the shapes well. I work swiftly, the lines already so familiar to me, the deeply etched frown that pulls my eyebrows close to protect my eyes from the glare, the dark shadows under the eyes. This is the core of my face, of my portraits, that I paint again and again, often not bothering with the other features which feel less distinct.

This time the colours run and blend in places and my expression comes out particularly dark and anxious looking. I suddenly feel exhausted. I pack everything away and lie down on my bed, hoping to make time pass, hoping that it will soon be night and that I can end this day, which hasn't been a particularly bad day, so I am not sure why I am feeling so scratchy and anxious. I look at my watch. Only an hour has passed. It is only five o'clock. Three hours to go before supper. Five hours before bed time. How am I going to fill this time?

I put my hands into my pockets in boredom. They are full of junk as usual. I pull out the contents and examine them dully. Amongst the crumpled tissues and odd coins I find a receipt. It is from a hotel in Rome. *Pensione Arcadia*. It is made out to my name. Strange, I have no memory at all of having been there.

### **Friday 2 November**

On Friday afternoon I take the 2.30 ferry to Anzio. Spaces in between, transitions. The sun is hazy over the sea, high cirrus clouds filter and obscure the light but the glare is painful to my eyes. I take the bus in rush hour traffic, where bodies are stacked, piled into the little



standing space and pressed up tight against one another. And after a while I feel an anonymous hand touch me, grope, then slide under my skirt. *La mano morta*, as they call it here, the dead hand. I try to move away but the disembodied hand follows me so I eventually alight in the square a few stops away from Via San V. and walk the rest of the distance to the *Questura*, my feet echoing on the pavement. The rubbish bins, the *cassonetti*, are full and garbage is overflowing onto the pavement. Some of the bags have been torn open and orange peels and coffee grinds litter the ground. I stop breathing as I walk past, but it takes too long and when I am forced to take a deep breath the smell of decomposition fills my lungs.

Outside the building tired-looking people hang around waiting, leaning against the iron railings or smoking nervously. It is impossible to distinguish the bystanders and informers from the plainclothes policemen, scruffy and unkempt, who wait with them, attempting to infiltrate their lives.

I go into the dusty drab shabbiness of the *Ufficio Stranieri* of the *Questura*, the immigration section, the high wooden counter at which lines of people wait, day in, day out, mostly immigrants hoping for a break, hoping that today, at last, all the documents they need will miraculously come together and the file will be complete and they will be given the *permesso di soggiorno* which will allow them access to the land of milk and honey, to the stability that makes possible memory and hope which are so tenuous even here but impossible in their places of origin. Africa, Asia, Middle East, South America, Central America, Eastern Europe. Just about anywhere except for this small haven of privilege here where they are trying to find a space, a tiny harbour that will take them in and give them rest. A place that will allow them to collect themselves and their memories and aspirations and make a story, a narrative that will give meaning to their fragmented lives.

I join the queue, the dark-skinned, anxious, exhausted-looking queue of *extra-comunitari* and wait, like all the others, patiently, part of the herd. A woman in front of me in the queue is giving the breast to her infant as she stands, naturally, unconcerned about her public nakedness, unconscious of the hungry looks of the men, the lewd comments. I step up to the counter where there is a sign saying *EXTRA-COMMUNITARI* in capital letters, and ask for *Ispettore* Lupo. I am told to wait. I sit down on the graffiti-covered bench against the wall and wait. Nothing happens. After an hour I rejoin the queue, and when my turn comes, repeat my request. Once again I am told, more impatiently this time, to wait. I

return to the bench feeling heavy and tired. Time passes; the queue grows shorter and at last straggles to an end. I return to the counter and struggle to catch the attention of one of the police clerks. He looks at me in irritation.

- *Che c'è ancora?* What is it this time?

I tell him I am waiting to see Ispettore Lupo.

- *E' già andato.* He's left. Come back on Monday.

As I walk back towards the bus stop my eyes catch sight of a small sign on an old building. *Pensione Arcadia*. I suddenly remember the receipt I found in my pocket yesterday. I look up at the building but there is nothing to be seen, just the brass plaque with the name and the single star beneath it.

I stand outside on the pavement, trying to understand. I know I have been here before, but it's a feeling on my skin like a ripple of recognition rather than a memory that I can locate and think about. It disturbs me not to be able to remember.

I wander on along the street. The plane trees are bare now, their trunks livid grey in the pale light. I remember reading somewhere that they will all have to be cut down soon, that they are hollowed out from within, diseased, their hearts dead. Their falling branches represent a danger to pedestrians and motorists. Heavy traffic inches past emitting clouds of exhaust fumes into the already polluted air. I am uncertain what to do. There are other people standing around like me and I realise that they are waiting for a bus. After a few minutes one arrives. I follow them on board and take a seat near the window. I watch the familiar streets pass by. I get off near Castel Sant'Angelo and walk down near the river which glides past greasily after the November rains. Two canoes pass under the bridge near the far bank, the oarsmen rowing in unison, thin black shadows, their reflections repeating their shapes on the waters.

It is dark as I walk back through the narrow streets towards the bus terminus. Under the deep porticoes figures emerge and retreat into the shadows. Women, mouths gaping in rage or laughter, pace to and fro in the cold night air. Their eyes meet mine, and then pass on, immediately excluding me as a client. An old man with a purple nose comes up to me, his tongue out, lips wet and covered in spittle, and rubs his fingers in my face, the age-old symbol of money, and I shake my head in confusion and turn away. Dark bird-shapes wing silently, just beyond vision, a mere presence.

Cars sidle by, one stops. A woman steps up to the open window, takes in the details of the driver's lust. Sometimes this will be all he requires and he will speed away to spill his seed alone. Others, more literal, will invite her in and consummate their passion on the back seat of the car in the *piazzale* around the corner.

I pull my threadbare corduroy coat tighter around me, feeling the cold filter up into the sleeves and down the neck. I wrap my scarf up around my face so that only my eyes can be seen above the scratchy fabric. I feel conspicuous and try to pass by as quickly as I can. At last I see Sabrina. There is recognition, a half smile, and the woman turns and leads the way towards a small hotel a block away. I follow.

### **Saturday 3 November**

She is already gone when I awake in the morning, and I catch a bus down to the river. I walk across the ancient Roman bridge to *Trastevere* where I have discovered a second-hand bookseller who has a couple of stands, rather like steel *cassonetti*, that he locks at night, but that open out into shelves full of strange books by day. I have started buying books by the box from him. Most of the time he has not even opened the boxes and has no idea what is in them – they are as they have arrived from the seller. Whatever is in them I read, as they have been delivered to his stall. Often the owner of the books has died and his sons and daughters are getting rid of his earthly belongings as quickly as they can, getting rid of the things that formed the edges of his mind, that went to shape his thoughts and world. His children want nothing to do with that world, convinced that the world that they are creating around themselves will be infinitely superior and more interesting than that of the previous generation. Except that their children will do the same with their personal effects when the time comes. Sometimes, as I wander the streets I read the funeral announcements, black framed, on the walls or doors of the buildings, and I wonder if the books I am about to read belonged to this or that person. *Commendator* Ettore Cosa, *Avvocato* Mario Rossi, *Vedova* Elena Capecci. I like to imagine their lives, governed by routine and social obligations, the little worries and concerns and niceties that occupied so many of their waking hours.

I buy a box of books from the bookseller and am curious to see what is inside, so I open it on the bus on my way back to the Anzio. The books had evidently belonged to a certain *Avvocato* Mario Rossi. He had neatly written his name and the date into the front page of each book, in a rather old-fashioned flowing hand-writing. I imagine a small, meticulous

man. The books are all in immaculate condition, although they are obviously well-read with notes and passages underlined and book marks at favourite pages. There is a well-thumbed, clearly well-loved copy of the *Divina Comedia*, printed cheaply on furry pages that must have had to be cut open with a paper knife – the edges are still slightly frayed.

Amongst the books I discover a small cheaply printed one that looks particularly interesting to me. It is fragments of a *Diario*, written between 1553 and 1555 by a Florentine artist, Jacopo Carucci also known as Pontormo, after the name of the little town where he was born. I let it fall open by chance and my eyes stop on the following entries for a few days in the spring of 1556 just before he died, while he was busy painting the frescoes in the choir of San Lorenzo in Florence:

Tuesday evening I felt all weak and I ate a rosemary loaf and an omelette and salad and some dried figs.

Wednesday I fasted.

Thursday evening, a rosemary bread, omelette with one egg, a salad and four ounces of bread.

Friday evening, salad, pea soup and an omelette and five ounces of bread.

Saturday, butter, salad, sugar and an omelette.

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> April I had lunch with Bronzino and I did not eat in the evening.

Monday evening I had steamed bread with butter, an omelette and two ounces of cake.

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

On Saturday I went to the tavern; salad and omelette and cheese. I felt good.

This could be my diary.

It is very strange, to see him list these days that kept coming and departing with nothing to say for themselves. I think I would like to translate this book for myself. I feel an affinity with Pontormo even though we are hundreds of years apart in time.

### **Sunday 4 November**

After lunch I walk up on the mountain, feeling a need to connect with my body, to draw my mind down into my body, this busy restless mind that leaves me so little rest. I set my

foot to the little path that zigzags up through the bushes from behind the village. I pass the sign that says that the nesting season is now completed for the year and thanking me for not disturbing the birds – the sign has been there unchanged for the past three years. I walk upwards, feeling the tightening and release in my calf muscles, first one then the other, the rhythmic feel. I reach the first peak, my breath coming faster, recognising the beating of my heart in my chest, uncontrolled, or, at least, out of my control, my will. My mind is clearer now, focussed on these physiological movements, on the dampness gathering in the hair at the nape of my neck. I wonder whether to take the contour, to limit the scope of my walk or to scale the highest peak. I decide that I need to extend myself, that I need to push through some kind of resistance, some barrier that is holding my thoughts, my emotions in a limited frame, so I take the path that leads down into a little dell amidst a few last pine trees and then begins to climb, first to the shepherd's hut, then up the side of the buttress and on and up climbing steeply so that I have to stop every few minutes to catch my breath, up to the radio mast, the highest point of the island. The sun is now high and I am sweating freely. I stop often to rest and drink water. I realise I am exhausted, that I have pushed beyond my own strength. I am thirsty, dehydrated and have only a few sips of water left in my bottle. I wonder whether I should stop, go back, retrace my steps, but I realise that it will be shortest to go forward. I have been marching now for about three hours.

There are men working on the heavy cables that tie the radio mast to the earth; bound high up in the air they call from one to the other to check their progress, sharp birdlike cries high in the rarefied air. I wonder whether they can see me as I creep snail-like along the path at their feet. And then the descent, rapid, steep, lowering myself from rock to rock, afraid to twist my ankle, afraid to fall.

### **Monday 5 November**

I am in my classroom when I see the man arrive. It is a windy grey day, the sea dark green and opaque with white spray rushing across the surface where the wind catches the tips of the waves. I sit correcting homework in between lessons, struggling to keep my mind focused on the simple thoughts of the children expressed in their even simpler words. Trying to pass time which weighs heavily on me. I watch the little boats bob on their anchors, the old men sitting on the bench on the jetty, talking, shouting garrulously at each

other; even though I can't hear their voices I know they are talking about politics or sport or women. There is nothing else.

The ferry arrives in a mixture of engine fumes, a smell of diesel oil and salt spray. I watch it manoeuvre and turn, its rudder churning the green water white, as it backs into its moorings. I watch the crew tie huge ropes to the bollards and see the gang-plank winched down, lowered from the stern. I watch the passengers disembark, a handful of islanders; at this time of the year there are no visitors. I see Ugo's uncle, holding a little hand-pushed trolley, standing to one side waiting for the fresh produce from the market to be unloaded. The seagulls mewl and circle in the hope of scraps. I see a figure emerge, a man dressed in a camel-hair coat with a hat low across his face. A porter carries his suitcase to a waiting mini-taxi. He climbs in next to the driver and the vehicle sets off up the hill.

For a few minutes my attention has been caught. I glance at my watch. Twenty to two. I have lost ten minutes in all. I return to the homework books. Fill the preposition into the sentence. The exercises have been set especially to trap the children, to make them think that the correct answer is the one that is closest to the Italian form. None of them has noticed this – they have all fallen into every trap. I shift my weight from one side to the other, uncomfortable here on this hard wooden chair. I wonder who the man is.

After school I make a point of going to the local grocer's to buy some eggs – it is a good place to find out what is happening on the island. I stand and wait my turn. It takes about ten minutes before I am served, and I know there will be a price to pay when I do at last find myself face to face with the grocer. In exchange for what I want to know I will have to volunteer some small information about myself, which will be passed on to the next customer after I leave. But over the years I have grown quite adept at avoiding questions that are too probing, that will give away more than I am prepared to tell. And in any case the questions asked will reflect the limits of the grocer's imagination so I am not greatly at risk.

He greets me elaborately as if he hasn't seen me for months.

*-Buongiorno, e come sta la nostra signorina inglese?*

He is patronising as usual and exaggerates the pronunciation of the words. I return his greeting and tell him I want six eggs. He barely registers my order. That is going much too fast. First he wants to explore.

- *Ha visto che brutto tempo? Come a Londra, no? Si sentira` a casa sua. Piove sempre a Londra, vero?*

- Yes, I nod, it rains all the time in London. As if I knew.

Everyone shakes their heads in wonder at the madness of foreigners who live in such inhospitable places.

I decide to try a question of my own.

- I saw a stranger arrive on the ferry this morning. Perhaps he is also from London?

At this everyone seems to have a comment but no-one seems to know very much. It is true, there is a man and he is not from here. He rents a house here for a month every year. He is *un forestiero*, which could mean foreigner but could also just mean stranger; for the islanders the two concepts are indistinguishable. The taxi driver said that he had taken him to Villa Circe on the headland, which he has rented until the end of November. It appears that the man has come here to work. But to their intense frustration, he has managed to avoid further investigation. The taxi driver was paid at the door and no more information was forthcoming.

I admit that I also feel frustrated and curious. Who could he be and what was he doing here, disturbing our simple retreat. Could he be German or English perhaps? My eggs are at last wrapped, each individually in newspaper and then placed carefully into a paper bag. I pay, greet everyone in the shop and leave.

I go home and make myself an omelette with two eggs and some cheese, then set out for a walk. Without even thinking about it I find myself walking up toward the headland. The wind is sharp and cold from the west and I feel my eyes and skin stinging as I struggle to hold to the path that runs along the top of the white shale cliffs. I see the turn-off to the house in the distance and I can see smoke rising from the chimney, but the house itself is hidden by vegetation and I can make out no other sign of life. I am not sure what I had been hoping for but I feel disappointed.

The clouds begin to clear as I make my way back home, and I walk along onto the jetty to watch the sunset. The water is clear and still in the chill autumn air, and I can see little fish, mullet probably, swimming back and forth under the wooden pilings. Their bodies flash and sparkle as they catch the sunlight filtered through the water, silver and blue as they turn in unison. I bend to look closer. Startled by my movement they seek refuge in the shadow of

a beam, and then dance back into the light when they see there is no danger. Tenuous shivering of light in water.

It is late when I get home. Somehow, I'm not sure how, time has passed and it is 8.30. I will have to rush to get to Modugno's where I usually have supper. I still haven't corrected the homework books and I know that means that tomorrow I will have double the quantity to mark and won't have time for a walk. I feel dull and irritable. I pull on my jacket and walk quickly down the alley to the *trattoria*. From the street I recognise the slightly musty smell of the table linen which has not been properly dried before being stored, the heavy bread which is only baked twice a week, and which by Sunday is stiff and crumbles easily when you break it.

Ugo's uncle is standing at the bar in the front room of the restaurant, red-faced, talking loudly and making lewd comments about the presenters on TV, strings of spittle forming between his thin lips. His eyes are bloodshot. As I walk through to the back room he orders another shot of *grappa* and tosses it back in one go, then slams the glass down on the counter with an exaggerated gesture. I wonder if it could be his voice that I hear sometimes at night, shouts echoing up the alley, a man's voice raised in anger, the sound of blows and then screaming, when I crouch at my window in the dark praying for it to stop. I pass through as quickly as I can to the dining room behind.

The stranger is here before me; he has taken my table.

I feel annoyed but find a place on the far side of the room. He gives no sign that he has noticed my resentment. Modugno waits on him attentively, hoping, I can see, that he will return as a regular during the dead season when trade is as thin as a stray dog. I strain to hear the man's accent when he places his order but he talks softly and I find it difficult to make out the words or distinguish the sounds. There is something slightly guttural about his accent although it sounds as if he is speaking English. Like me, he has brought a book to read, to use as a screen against intrusive conversations.

I gaze with little interest at the hand-typed menu, noting yet again that the accent on the e` is slightly off centre. I suppose it is because it is used more than most of the other keys. I order soup and then cheese and salad, more than I usually eat but I want to have an excuse to stay, to breathe in his presence. Modugno brings my meal, exchanges a few words with me, but his eyes are on the man, his words intended to create an impression on him rather than be a communication with me, it is clear, and indeed it does not really bother me



too much since my attention is also focused on the stranger rather than on my host. I watch, invisible, from my side of the room, pretending to read but aware of every move he makes. I am not sure why I am so interested in him.

The lights are on along the harbour wall, the *Lungomare*, when I come out of the restaurant, the coastguard vessel with *Finanza* printed in large white letters on the navy hull moored to one side. Seagulls, maddened by the bright spotlight on the end of the jetty scream at the confusion of day with night. I walk down to the edge of the quay, feeling the sticky warm breeze from the desert lift my hair and skirt – it will rain in a few days, I know, but for now there is some respite from the cold of the winter that is closing in. Old Cappi, the school secretary, is out and greets me. I nod in return and try to pass on. He touches my arm gently.

- *Come sta Signorina? Che fa qui così tardi? Ha mangiato?*

Trying to relate. Trying to be kind. But I want none of it.

He is a widow and lives by himself in a tiny flat at the far end of the harbour. Everyday he makes himself a plate of pasta for lunch with a glass of wine, and a *fettina* or ham and salad for supper. I know because he discusses it at the grocer's. I know what most people eat each day. I know most of what they do. There is no privacy here except in your thoughts. All my movements, my habits, even my underwear is scrutinised as it hangs on the line stretched across the narrow alley from just below my window to the opposite building on a little pulley so that I can move the washing right across the alley to catch the little sunlight that penetrates this far.

## **Tuesday 6 November**

I have gone on reading Pontormo's *Diario* today. Strange how very plain and flat it is. I would have expected him to write about his visions and paintings. Yet all he talks about is the difficulty and daily discomfort of his life. I suppose that is what I keep doing too. The daily grind of survival that is so exhausting in its monotony and relentlessness.

Friday I got up an hour before dawn and I did that torso from the arm down.

Saturday I did the thigh, and in the evening I cooked a piece of lamb.

Today was Palm Sunday and I had lunch with Bronzino.

Monday I did the head of that angel.

Tuesday I stayed at home and I don't know what I did.

Today was 1<sup>st</sup> April and I did the other thigh with the whole leg and foot.

Holy Thursday.

Friday I got up early and did the body of that child.

He eventually became a recluse, Pontormo that is, sealing himself, walling himself into the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, refusing to let anyone enter for over eleven years, and putting out a basket from the window for his supplies and communications with the outside world. Was he trying to keep out any form of change, trying to keep his existence totally under control? Here he painted scenes of the Creation and the Last Judgement, the Great Flood, scenes of heaven and hell.

Enough. My head is aching from all this reading and writing. The weather is warm today, unseasonably warm, the last breath of summer, so warm in fact that after school I pull on some shorts and a t-shirt. My legs and arms feel strange and white exposed to the air after more than two months wrapped up in jackets and long pants. I pack a picnic lunch, some boiled eggs and a salad and bread, perhaps taking my cue from Pontormo, and some fruit and almonds and walnuts, and put them into my rucksack. It is still early when I set off up the hill. A slight warm breeze ripples the surface of the sea, and the sunlight sparkles and fragments off it. The shadows are longer and cooler than they would be in summer, but for the rest it feels like a June day, and within a short time I am sweating. I had planned to go to *Chiaia di Luna* to have a swim, but it is so hot that I begin to long for shade rather than the glare of the beach, so I head inland to the only natural source of water on the island, a small spring that is dry for most of the year, but that is flowing after all the rain of the last month, and has formed a deep pool in a grove of cork trees.

Strange brownish green pebbles in running water, strange shapes, softly rounded, distorted by the lens of water. I dip my hand through the surface, seeing my skin turn greenish white and the lines change strangely as my fingers reach down and touch the round stones on the bottom. I watch the fingers go from one to another as if they do not belong to my arm. They finally stop and choose one and lift it out. It is heavier than I expected as my hand comes into the air and reconnects to my body. The pebble is slippery with green slime. It smells slightly fishy. I feel a sense of sudden disgust. The play of light through the leaves and water onto the pebbles has been lost and all that is left is this smelly slimy stone. I dip my hand in again. How can I capture this light, the evanescent ripple, the

haphazard playfulness of it? Unless in paint I can recreate it, a copy of it, an impression. Never the real thing which wavers and wanders in and out of my consciousness.

I open the bag and bring out the picnic I had prepared in my apartment hours ago, the hard-boiled eggs, the cheese, the salad, the buttered bread - a little feast. I have never got used to the local habit of eating unbuttered bread. I lay it out on a little tablecloth I had folded into a corner of the bag, then look at it listlessly. I don't feel hungry. I return to the little stream. It barely deserves the name, just a trickle of water really, but it feeds this pool that is full of frogs and tadpoles and salamanders. The frogs, now that they are used to my presence and are no longer afraid of the shadow I cast across the water where before there had only been dancing light, croak noisily to each other from the shallows. I watch for some time mesmerized by the flitting light and shadow on the water, and then eventually grow bored. I turn back to the picnic laid out on the bank, but it still looks uninteresting and I begin to pack it away. As I do so my eyes catch a movement amongst the reeds. I freeze and look again. Nothing. I must have imagined it. A pair of red dragonflies chase each other across the pond, across the field of my vision and disappear amongst the twisted trunks of the cork trees in the copse. A bird calls, urgently, once, twice, then a third time, and then falls silent. I sit and wait, certain that I have not been mistaken, that something is there.

The reeds part and the stranger steps out. He holds a rucksack in one hand, with the other he still holds the reeds apart, half in, half out. He looks around then steps forward at last leaving the cover of the reeds, his feet making no sound on the soft ground. I sit perfectly still, expecting to be seen, but he doesn't notice of me, it is as if I do not exist. He appears to be stalking an invisible prey. He follows the stream to the pool, unaware of my shape camouflaged by the shifting light and shadows under the tiny leaves of the cork trees. He kneels down and scoops up some water in his hand and drinks, then sits back on his haunches and begins to remove his clothes, first his shirt, then his jeans, until he stands naked on the bank. I hardly dare to breathe. A slight stirring of wind brushes the hair on the nape of his neck and he shrugs it away impatiently. Sunlight plays around his head like a halo. He lowers himself with a little grimace and a cry into the green water, his flesh turning whitish-green, the shape and length of his body foreshortened by the magnifying effect of the surface. He splashes across the pool, casting diamond drops of water into the air and creating a confusion of sound and light that leaves me feeling disturbed and excited. I lean against the trunk of the tree, my fingers touching the rough surface, exploring unthinkingly

the crevices, the protuberances, the moss-covered growth of many years. I can smell the bark, a growing green sap smell flowing up through the trunk past my fingers to the leaves. I lay my cheek against it, feeling it cool in contrast to my own heat. My eyes never leave him. He draws himself up and out of the pool, and sits on the bank with his feet still in the water, kicking lazily at the shadows. His skin is raised in goose bumps from the cold. He strokes his chest, touches the soft hairs growing there. At last he stands up and pulls his t-shirt back on and steps into his jeans and sneakers. He flings his bag back over his shoulder and sets off again, up the hill this time.

I breathe deeply, trying to capture any scent or trace of him still left in the copse. A vague smell of sunshine and dried leaves is all that remains. I set out my lunch again and this time devour it hungrily. It tastes good and nutritious, the orange sweet. I lie back at last, sated on the soft loamy earth and fall asleep.

It is late afternoon when I awake. The shadows are long and my body is stiff and cold. I pull myself awkwardly to my feet, brush the leaves off my clothes and pack away the remains of my lunch. I know I have been dreaming deeply but can't quite remember the images that hang tantalizingly just out of consciousness, just out of sight. I put my rucksack over one shoulder and begin the long walk back to the village, anxious to get home before it is completely dark.

### **Wednesday 7 November**

Today I am caught up in mid-term tests and marking and teachers' meetings which I resent but can do nothing about. I am forced to attend. I sit as far back as possible and try to avoid the gossip and idle conversations with the other members of staff. It is not too hard. They don't consider me one of themselves, both because I am a temporary teacher and because I am not Italian. One of the teachers is trying to persuade me to approach the unions about my precarious position here. She says that it is illegal for them to employ me on a temporary basis for so long and then possibly even send me away, that after a certain amount of time by law my status should become permanent. I do not feel like challenging the Italian government on a matter about which I feel so little enthusiasm or entitlement, but I don't even have enough energy to explain this to her so I am forced to hear her out.

I found my umbrella today, behind the classroom door where I must have left it last year, or perhaps the year before. I don't bother much about umbrellas. It was covered in

dust and the joints were stiff and slightly rusty, the fabric hardened and brittle, but it opened up after a few attempts. I will not need to buy a new one after all. It is beginning to look like rain again so I feel quite pleased to have it.

As I am leaving the school at lunchtime Sig. Cappi calls me into the office to tell me that I am wanted on the phone. I lift the receiver.

- *Pronto?*

- *Perche` non e` venuta venerdi`?* He doesn't give his name but I recognise the hollow dry voice at once. It is *Ispettore* Lupo again.

- I did come on Friday but they told me you had already left.

- *Deve ritornare. L'aspetto questo venerdi`.* I will expect you on Friday. Don't forget. Make sure you come this time.

He puts down the phone.

I hurry out under my umbrella feeling upset. I notice that Ugo is hovering outside the school gate. It crosses my mind that he is waiting for me. Perhaps he wants me to protect him against the other boys, now that I have saved him once. I pass through, ignoring him. I walk home quickly and close and lock the door behind me. I feel agitated. I suspect that he is following me but I know I have to keep him out. I have no place for him in my life.

#### **Thursday 8 November**

School. Home. I have a cheese sandwich for lunch.

Sunday and Monday I cooked myself a bit of veal that Bastiano bought for me and I spent the two days at home drawing and I had dinner by myself those three days.

Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> October

Wednesday 30.

There is no sign of the stranger. I imagine he is busy working in the comfort of his villa.

#### **Friday 9 November**

Rain has closed in over the little village again today. I can't remember such a grey rainy November in all my years here. I hear that there have been floods all over Italy, that the Po has broken its banks and many farms have been isolated. The water just keeps coming down. It is difficult to distinguish the sea from the sky when I look out. It is all just a grey union.

It is Friday and I know I must go and see Ispettore Lupo. After school I quickly prepare an overnight bag and rush down to the harbour to catch the ferry. I feel pleased to get away from the children and the island. I can hear the older boys' voices echoing through the village streets, singing a scurrilous song in mock Gregorian chant:

*Qui si celebra il mistero di San Cirillo  
che con il cazzo fatto a spillo  
incolava i microbi.*

They draw it out long on the final note, and then burst into mocking laughter. I try to translate the words in my head but as usual English doesn't quite catch the sexual nuances. The word prick is so prim. I will first go and see *Ispettore Lupo* and then maybe catch a train to Florence to see the *Deposition from the Cross* by Pontormo in the *Santa Felicità* church.

In his *Diario* there are some sketches that he did for the Choir of San Lorenzo, which are all that remained after the frescoes were destroyed in 1786. I find them fascinating, these massed bodies, twisted, intertwined, of the dead on the day of the Last Judgement, of bodies entangled, limbs disembodied, parts that do not belong anywhere, arms that appear from under someone else's chest. Blue tinged flesh, blue like the sky, the blue of lapis lazuli which he ground and mixed into his paint.

I take a seat on the upper level since all the seats below are occupied. I rub the window with my sleeve to clear the mist and see a taxi stop on the dock, and the stranger emerge. I can't see his face which is obscured by the large black umbrella he holds to protect himself from the rain. He disappears from my sight as he enters the wide open maw of the ferry, then he reappears at the entrance to the lounge. He sits in the only free seat a few rows ahead of me. I try to focus on my book, my rough translation of the *Diario*:

On Tuesday I had half a kid's head and soup for dinner.

Wednesday I had the other half and some sweet wine and five ounces of bread and a caper salad.

Thursday evening a hearty beef soup and salad.

Pontormo carries on and on about the minute details of his life, of what he ate, of his bowel movements, as if these were the most important things, the ones he felt it was important to record for his own understanding, for posterity.

On Tuesday evening I ate a green salad and an omelette.

On Ash Wednesday two farthings of almonds and an omelette and walnuts and I worked on

that figure above the pumpkin (figure).

Thursday evening a green salad and caviar and an egg; the Duchess came to San Lorenzo and the Duke accompanied her.

Friday evening an omelette, some broad beans and a bit of caviar and four ounces of bread.

Saturday evening I ate two eggs.

Sunday, which was Easter Sunday, I went to lunch with Bronzino and I had dinner with him too.

It is getting dark by the time the ferry arrives in Anzio. In the bustle at the harbour I lose sight of the man. I catch the bus through to Rome and wander along the rainy streets, the mulch of wet fallen leaves clinging to my shoes. By late afternoon I am in front of the *Questura* again. Nothing seems to have changed from my last visit. Even the faces look the same. I wait in the same tired queue, recognising the particular depressed smell of this place from the last time, a smell of nervous perspiration and poverty. I feel myself falling into a state of helpless lethargy like everyone else. After about an hour my turn comes. I ask for Ispettore Lupo. I am directed to a side corridor, second floor, and third door to the left. I wait for the lift with an elderly peasant woman who looks frightened as the door slides open. She turns away in confusion.

- *Mi si schianta il cuore*, I think my heart will burst, she mutters to herself cryptically.

I wander along the poorly lit corridor and at last come to the door. I knock and enter.

He is sitting at a desk writing in a large ledger; a pale man with intense eyes, wearing the grey-blue trousers of the police with a crimson stripe down the side of the leg. He takes no notice of me when I enter, but I know he is aware of my presence because the pen stops moving, hangs suspended for a second in midair, and then his pale fingers, bluish around the nails, brush a scrap of dust off the page.

- *Permesso?* I say.

He doesn't reply but I walk up to the desk anyway. The room smells of stale smoke.

- *Ispettore Lupo?* I ask.

- *Sì. Mi dica*, he says at last without lifting his head from his ledger.

- You wanted to talk to me? You called. You asked me to come. My name is Anna P.

His eyes lift slowly off the ledger, flicker over my face, appear for a moment to be looking for something he can't quite locate, and land at last on me.

- *Ah, la Signorina P.*

He examines me carefully.

- *Finalmente. Era ora.*

He opens one of the drawers in the desk and pulls out a small bundle of files. I notice a half-empty bottle of brandy lying next to them in the drawer which is otherwise empty. He sits back in his chair and stares at me impassively with pale green-blue eyes.

- *Perche` non e` venuta prima?*

That accusing tone again. I tell him that I had already been to see him but that he was not in his office. He watches me carefully as I speak but says nothing. He drops his eyes to the file and pages through document after document and at last finds what he was looking for.

- *Mi dia il passaporto.*

I hand him my passport. He takes it, looks at the photograph, and then gets up and leaves the room without saying a word. I wait standing in front of the desk for a few minutes, and finally sit down on the edge of the bench beneath the high barred window. Half an hour passes. I go to the door at last but the corridor is empty so I sit down again and wait for another quarter of an hour. Eventually I hear his dry cough in the passage and he reappears at the door. He does not excuse himself for his absence but sits down and stares at me again.

- *Allora, mi dica.*

- What do you want me to tell you?

- *Lo sa perche` e` qui, vero?* He speaks slowly in a thin dry voice. Is he just a bully or does he know something about me that I don't know, I wonder?

- No I don't know why you've called me here. What do you want to know?

- *Ma si` che lo sa.*

- Please would you tell me why I am here

- *Le autorità chiedono notizie di Lei. Ci sono delle irregolarità.* Questions are being asked about you.

I feel myself spinning, falling into confusion.

- Questions?

He smiles.

As if we were just chatting, chance acquaintances on a train, he asks:

*Da quanto tempo e` in Italia?*

- I've been here about twenty years. You have my file. You know that as well as me.



I stare out of the barred window at the darkening sky. A bird flies past heavily.

- What do you want from me? I ask without turning my head.

- *Perche' e' venuta qui? Perche' ha lasciato il Sudafrica?* Why did you leave South Africa?

I don't reply. He pauses for a minute and then continues.

- *Abbiamo controllato la sua pratica. Mancano dei documenti.*

He points at the file.

- What is missing?

- *Manca il certificato di nascita per cominciare.* Your birth certificate is missing. Why is it missing?

I look at him in surprise. I had been expecting much worse than that.

- You have my birth certificate. It was part of my application years ago. You must have lost it.

He looks at me again with cold eyes.

- You must please apply to the South African authorities for this document at once. It is very important. Do you understand? *Capisce?*

I shrug.

He looks at me carefully.

- *C'era un'altra cosa. Piu' importante.* There is something else. Tell me about the *Pensione Arcadia*? When did you last stay there?

Flame tugs at the edges, at the dark whorls of my mind.

There is a knock on the door. A uniformed policeman steps into the room and salutes

- *La vogliono di sopra.* Lupo grunts, nods and rises. He looks at me.

- *Ora puo' andare.* You may go. But we need to talk further. *Torni ancora a vedermi. Venerdi' prossimo Le va bene?*

- I don't understand why you need to see me again.

- *Dobbiamo parlare ancora.* There are other matters. And if you don't get the record from the consulate you may lose your residence permit. *Capisce?* Come again next Friday?

I nod, feeling trapped. He knows he has me in his power, and that I can't do anything.

- Yes. Next Friday will be fine.

He shows me to the door and disappears down the corridor. I realise suddenly that he has not returned my passport to me.

I return to the main hall, but the queue is now gone and there is no-one about. I go to the entrance. There is a policeman on duty there. I try to explain what has happened, that my passport has been taken, but his task is simply to keep the entrance clear and he pushes me rudely away and outside. When I try to come back inside he tells me that the offices are now closed and that I should come back on Monday.

I wander through the streets uncertain what to do or where to go. I am reluctant to go back to the island without my passport, yet I can't stay overnight in a hotel without a document. I stop at a café and order a cappuccino which I drink standing up, then walk on. It is dark already, cold and drizzling and workers are rushing from their offices to the comfort of their homes, to a warm meal and to an evening spent dozing in front of the television. I can feel the damp penetrating through the fabric of my worn coat.

Ahead of me I see the bright lights of a theatre, taxis stopping and depositing expensively dressed people with subtle perfumes, men in dark suits and alpaca coats, women in high heels and furs. As I draw nearer I see a large blue car stop and the stranger from the island climbs out and takes the umbrella that is proffered to him, then turns and holds the door open. A dark haired woman emerges and takes his arm, her hand holding him closely to ensure that she doesn't move out of the dry protective bubble under the umbrella. I can't help but follow them. I glance through the glass doors of the theatre and see a ticket office and a woman sitting behind the window. On an impulse I go in and ask if there are any tickets left for the performance – I have no idea what it is to be. She checks, nods and names the price. I pay at once without thinking. I stand to one side of the foyer and look around, taking in the buzz of polite conversation, the excitement, the sparkle in the eyes, the bursts of laughter, deep and self-contented of the men, the tinkling voices of the women, the golden light glittering from Venetian chandeliers. I watch the man, elegant in a suit made of expensive fabric, a gold ring on his left hand that catches the light and sparkles as he gesticulates.

A bell rings and we move into the theatre. I sit three rows behind them to the left. The woman also sits to his left so I can see his profile as he turns to speak to her, see his eyes drop to meet hers, the warm liquid gaze that holds perhaps a second longer than necessary. His body bends in to touch hers at the shoulder, a promise of intimacy envelopes and separates them from everything that surrounds them. Knowing her so close, he whispers something in her ear. She flushes and laughs and does not pull away. The lights go down,

the conductor enters the pit, the audience applauds and I with them, but not for a moment do my eyes leave the couple in front of me. I lean forward and breathe in deeply, trying to catch the elusive fragrance of her body, but there are too many other overpowering perfumes around me and I am unable to single out, to distinguish that particular scent from all the others like hers in the huge auditorium.

At last the curtain opens and for the first time I learn what the performance is to be. *Salome*. My attention is caught at last by the haunting voice of the prophet from his underground prison.

*How black it is down below!*

*oh how terrible, how terrible it is to be in so black a pit*

*it is much like a tomb*

I feel caught up with the image of Salomé's wild naked dancing, the way her face is covered in blood when she lifts the severed head of John the Baptist from the plate and kisses it.

Afterwards I follow them to a small restaurant down a side street that is popular with opera goers. I pull open the door and light spills out onto the dark pavement. There is a din of voices and laughter, and cigarette smoke hangs in the golden haze. I take off my coat and look around. I find a table near the kitchen at the back of the room. They are sitting at a table against the far wall talking softly, intimately to each other so that I can't hear their words. She looks flushed; her eyes seek his; their knees touch under the table as if drawn by some invisible inner magnet. The light on the wall above their heads catches their hair and makes it glow above the pallor of their complexions. It's as if the rest of the world does not exist. They sit close, arms and fingers touching on the white tablecloth; it is almost as if they are caressing each other. I feel like an intruder invading their privacy, penetrating places that are forbidden to me, so I drop my eyes to my book. My mind is at last caught by Pontormo:

On Wednesday the weather was fine and in the evening I dined on 10 ounces of bread.

Wednesday morning it was cold and I stayed at home; I dined on 9 ounces of bread and the finest lamb.

Thursday I worked on those two arms and I dined on 9 ounces of bread, meat and cheese and it was quite cold.

Friday I did the head with that rock beneath it. I ate 9 ounces of bread, an omelet and salad

and my head felt dizzy.

Saturday I did the chest and the hand and I dined on 10 ounces of bread.

On Sunday I ate 10 ounces of bread and I spent all day feeling weak and tired and irritable – the weather was beautiful and it was full moon.

Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> April I felt well – all my complaints had vanished – I ate 8 ounces of bread. I wasn't dizzy and I wasn't weak and I felt hopeful.

I am still eating when they stand to leave. He fetches her coat, soft chocolate cashmere, and helps her into it, folding it softly round her body, then pulls his own over his shoulders and they make their way to the counter to pay. I catch the scent of her body as she passes.

I wander aimlessly towards the centre of town getting more and more lost in the maze of tiny streets and alleys. None of them runs straight so I have no idea after a while what direction I am going in. I have no idea where I am, nor does it seem very important to know. My feet are growing sore and tired so I go into the bar next to the station which stays open all night. I push open the door, wipe my feet in the sawdust spread across the entrance, and enter.

It is dimly lit. A jukebox is playing hits from the seventies in the corner, something by Orietta Berti and Massimo Ranieri, competing with the voices on the TV. Two or three men slouch in white plastic chairs watching TV on a screen suspended from the ceiling. The tired-looking barman idly polishes a glass with a stained cloth. I don't normally drink spirits but I am cold and suddenly very weary and weak, so I order a *café corretto* with brandy. I pay and carry it over to a little table in the corner where I sit down and unbutton my coat. The TV is showing Formula One racing, the cars whining like insects as they pass the camera. One of the men starts talking, a rambling story full of invectives against the government which in his opinion is squandering tax-payers' money. He describes it all as a *Pozzo di San Patrizio*, a bottomless well that they keep dipping into. He falls silent for a while, and then orders another glass of wine. He drinks it in a single gulp and points with his finger to show that he wants it refilled. He begins to speak again to no-one in particular and indeed no-one seems to be listening, except me, but I have my eyes closed and am pretending not to, or perhaps the barman who is maybe listening more to his tone of voice than the words. He speaks of prison, of how he always commits a small crime and allows himself to be caught just before the winter really starts, so that he will have a roof over his head for the very cold months. The problem is how to calibrate the offence so that he will be given a sentence long enough

to last the winter but that will allow him free once the sap starts to rise in his veins again in springtime. He goes on and on about people he has met inside, about a woman he knows outside. My eyes grow heavy and my head aches. I order another coffee with brandy, but it just makes my stomach burn and I push it to one side at last. I look at my watch. It is already 4 am. Too late to do anything else. I will just have to stay until morning or until they close. It is as good a plan as any, and at least it is dry. I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes. The background noise continues lulling me into sleep. From time to time I wake up and become conscious that my mouth is open, my posture sagging, and I straighten myself and try to bring order to my disordered thoughts until sleep overcomes me once more. I half wake at one point and find that the man is sitting by my side, his arm around my shoulders, but I can't rouse myself and at last I fall into a fitful sleep, full of disturbing dreams. Black birds tumble, roll, slide, heave, a shapeless mass of unformed, seething life, the primordial confusion of life and death, of body parts fragmenting, decomposing and recomposing. A policeman sits in the shadows and laughs and offers me a platter with a bloodied head on it. I try to escape, I try to run but my legs are trapped in the black decomposing matter. My dreams are interspersed with moments of uncomfortable wakefulness in which I become aware of my stale mouth, of unknown hands touching my body, of my damp clothes, my discomfort at sleeping on a hard chair.

### **Saturday 10 November**

At 6 o'clock I stand up and go to the bathroom. I tidy myself as best I can in the tiny bathroom stacked high with empty beer crates, then go next door to the station. Somehow in the midst of sleepless dreams I have resolved that movement away is what I need, and that I will catch the first train out of the station, wherever it is going. I will let fate decide.

The first train, coming from Palermo, is arriving in twenty minutes and heading north to Copenhagen, passing through Florence on its way. That confirms it. I am going to Florence to see the *Deposition* by Pontormo after all. I wait on the platform with two or three other early travellers watching the track to where it curves out of sight amongst a sprawl of apartment blocks and TV aerials. It is still dark but the first glimmer of morning is just beginning to rise lividly beneath the clouds to the east. The train, shiny with rain, limps slowly into the station. I follow the general movement. I climb the stairs to the door and step into the corridor. It is packed full of people sitting everywhere, in the compartments,

on suitcases in the passage, pressed against the steamed-up windows. I push my way through the mass of bodies and by luck find a seat in one of the compartments. The air is heavy and stale. Clearly the other passengers have spent the night travelling. Some are still asleep, their bodies abandoned against the green plastic seats.

I sit in the train and slip again into a half sleep. It is warm and comfortable and my breathing deepens. I catch hold of myself, force my eyes back open, glance at the man sitting next to me, check my watch, twenty minutes to go to the next station. I see him glance sideways, his eyes on my thighs in the skirt and dark stockings. I adjust my position slightly, re-cross my legs, feeling my skirt hitch up slightly but not prepared to do anything about it. I feel too drowsy, the compartment too warm. I am flushed, aware of my body scent, lulled by the gentle swaying of the high speed train. I force myself awake again, look out of the window at the fallow fields that have been ploughed in readiness for spring, the greasy soil of the Tiber valley which the plough has turned slowly, slicing and turning into furrows over and over across the wide plain. Low grey clouds hang heavy overhead promising more rain.

The outskirts, confused and ugly, of a town flash past and now the landscape is changing, the hills are rising up on the left of the train bringing embankments covered in shrubs and mimosas into view while the land drops away invisible on the other. The train slows as it enters a tunnel, and the compartment darkens, then lightens again as we come through. I feel the man move beside me in his seat, his thigh graze mine, then he is still, our legs touching. I close my eyes, uncertain, then let go, relinquish control. Wait to see what will happen. Vaguely curious, more sleepy than anything else. Comfortable, warm, the pressure from his thigh increases, now it is not just by accident, no longer casual, it is deliberate, there is intention in it. If I want it to stop, now is the moment. I breathe deeply and don't move. The train enters another tunnel and the compartment falls into complete darkness. I feel his hand touch my knee, hesitate for a moment then begin to rise. I allow my legs to fall slack, open, feel his hand slipping between them and up, touching, aware now that there is no barrier, the fingers probe, penetrate deeply, then withdraw and the train trundles out again into the daylight. The other passengers have noticed nothing but I draw myself up on my seat and cross my legs. He is looking out of the far window as if completely unaware, *ignaro*, of my presence, his hands folded loosely in his lap. A few minutes later we reach our destination and the train pulls into the station. I feel him brush against me from

behind as we push our way along the narrow passageway to the door. I feel his presence behind me again as I stand at the top of the steps looking out at the platform; I pause for a moment, then step down off the train and lose him in the crowd.

I walk towards the river and then turn left and follow the *Lungarno Corsini* upstream, listening to the soft accents of the people, the aspired Etruscan sounds that so characterise the local speech. I cross over at the *Ponte Vecchio* to the little church of *Santa Felicità*, one of the oldest in Florence. The church is dark and empty. The high nave and pillars running along the main body of the church make it feel austere and spiritual, different from the theatrical overabundance, the false marble and papier mache' mouldings of the baroque churches further south. The painting I am seeking is in a little chapel to the right. There is a high wrought-iron grating across the front of the chapel which impedes access to the *Deposition*. You can look through the bars but go no closer.

I put some coins into a slot and the lights come on and illuminate what I have come to see: Pontormo's *Deposition*. The Madonna gazes longingly towards her dead son, while the helpers lift his heavy inert body from the cross. It is a strange scene full of grief and sorrow and yearning, almost suspended in air. The figures bearing the weight of the body barely touch the ground, as if in a sense they were dancing. The centre of the painting is empty; all the figures are around the sides including the lifeless body of Christ which is draped across the bottom. The bodies entwine and merge into a knot so that it is almost impossible to work out which limb belongs to who, but it is clear that there is one arm too many. The flesh has a bluish tinge to it.

I sit on a hard wooden pew and gaze up at the scene. It makes me uncomfortable not to know where that arm belongs. I know I should be able to work it out but my mind feels as if it is slipping and I can't quite keep my focus. My head is bursting, throbbing from lack of sleep. The light goes out and I am left sitting alone in the dark. An old woman, thin, grey-faced, silently enters the church and crosses herself. She kneels next to me in front of the *Deposition*, prays for a few seconds and then settles back onto the pew waiting to be confessed. A priest shuffles into the church from a side door, takes his seat in the dark wooden confessional box tucked against a pillar and closes the curtain behind him. At a signal that I do not catch, the woman gets up, goes to kneel at the side of the box and begins to whisper through the wooden grate.

The words are indistinct but the whispering fills the chapel and echoes up through the vault. The woman's voice disturbs me, a keening that goes on and on, interspersed from time to time by the deeper reassuring voice of the priest. It feels as if the pain will never stop. After a while I get up and light a single candle from the box of matches that is tied with a piece of dirty string to the leg of the table on which stand rows and rows of burnt-out stumps, offerings by the faithful that no-one has bothered to clean away. I watch the candlelight flicker over the surface of the fresco, picking up the grain. I wish I could pray but I would not know what to pray for, nor how to do it. I kneel and fold my hands in front of me as I was taught to do as a small child at bedtime but the thoughts and words will not come. I can not imagine myself talking to anyone.

At last I sit back on the seat feeling my knees sore and stiff. I get up to go, then feel reluctant to leave this place. I put out some more money and take two more candles. I place them carefully in the little metal clasps in line with the first one and light them, watching the flame catch alight and begin to glow warmly with a golden self-contained life. I stand and watch entranced the three little flames in the high cold dark church. The woman leaves the confessional and kneels again in the darkened pew and I turn my back and come out into the daylight and get caught up in the hordes of tourists pushing their way across the bridge. So many people. I try to imagine what it must have been like at Pontormo's time. The same buildings stand as they did then; he too must have crossed the *Ponte Vecchio* to reach the church from where he lived each day. There was bad damage to the city during the war, and all the other bridges were blown up, but this bridge was never touched even though the Germans were aware that the Partisans were using the secret corridor to move backwards and forwards across the river.

I turn into the side streets to avoid the crowds, and catch a glimpse of myself reflected in a shop window, distorted, swollen, with dark eyes. I look away quickly, not liking what I see.

My eyes are inexplicably drawn to a shop across the street. I cross and look into the window. It is a *casalinghi*, a shop that sells household goods. The display is set up for a wedding register even though this is not the season for weddings; fine porcelains, silverware, *bonbonieri*, pots and pans, a row of knives. A thought insinuates itself into my brain, and will not shift, it sticks there like some primordial underwater sucking thing.



I enter the shop. A little bell rings as I step over the threshold, and an elderly woman steps out of a back room to serve me. She stubs out a cigarette in a metal ashtray next to the till.

- I would like a knife, I say. - I need a knife.

Her eyes run impassively over my face.

- *Che tipo di coltello?*

- Like the one in the window. I point.

She coughs, a rasping, spitting sound, and pulls aside the little curtain that acts as the backdrop to the display in the window and extracts the tray with the knives.

- *Quale vuole?*

I stretch out my hand to pick up the knife, but she quickly pulls the tray away.

- *Non si tocca.*

- That one, I say, pointing.

She grunts in assent, then picks it up and holds it against her hand, moving it from side to side. It sparkles in the light that penetrates from the window.

- How much is it? I gesture towards the knife. She names the price, doubled I am sure because of what she perceives is an English accent. I accept and draw out the money. She wraps the knife carefully first in tissue paper, then in wedding gift wrap, white with silver wedding bells and the words, *Tanti Auguri*, Congratulations, repeated over and over. The transaction is done. The little bell rings behind me as I step back out into the street. Dark birds wheel in the sky, a black ball of them that turns as one, becoming silver as it reflects the rays of the setting sun, then black again as it turns away. Then suddenly the ball shatters and the birds fly off in all directions like dark thoughts across the sky.

I feel reluctant to go back to the station when I leave the shop, so I wander back down towards the river. It is late afternoon at this point and the shadows are long. Birds are gathering for the night in holes in buildings, under bridges, wherever they can find a place for the night, a little protection, for all creatures seek protection from the elements when dark falls, except for those which hunt by night, which use the shadows to prey on those weaker than themselves. I stand on the embankment gazing out across the ancient stream, polluted now after so many centuries' contact with man. There is someone standing a few metres from me, also intent on looking out, but I can't make out his features in the dark.

Today Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> January 1554 I fell and sprained my shoulder and arm. I was in pain so I spent six days at Bronzino's house, then I returned home and was ill until Carnival which was on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1554.

Sunday morning the 11<sup>th</sup> March 1554 I went to lunch with Bronzino, chicken and veal, and I felt well (so much so that when they came to fetch me at home I was in bed – it was quite late and when I got up I felt swollen and full – it was quite a good day). In the evening I had some roast salt beef that made me thirsty and on Monday evening I dined on cabbage and an omelette.

I walk heavily back to the station, along narrow streets, dodging cars parked on the pavement and huge rubbish bins overflowing with garbage.

I catch the first train south and by the evening I am back in my apartment. My little bird's water bowl is completely dry and she looks frightened and distressed. I try to talk to her and put my finger through the bars for her to peck but she huddles in a corner and stares at me with scared eyes so I put the cover over her cage and go to bed.

### **Sunday 11 November**

I mark homework all morning.

### **Monday 12 November**

Leonardo has not done his homework, or so he says, although I am certain that his mother would have checked and insisted that he should do it. There is an edge of pride to his statement and he stares at me defiantly when I ask for his book. I am not sure what to do. If I make an incident of it I will be playing into his hands, yet I can't ignore it either.

- You'll have to do it for tomorrow then, and bring a note from your mother.

- *Ma maestra, ci'ho tanti compiti per domani. Non posso.*

- I don't care how much homework you have for tomorrow, you will have it here on my desk by 9 o'clock. Do you understand? And your homework book will be signed by your mother. Otherwise you will have to go and speak to the headmaster about it.

I turn away from him and go on with the lesson. I have won this round. There is no way he can defy me and get away with it, but I know that his hatred and rage have now redoubled and that I should expect trouble.

During playground duty I notice Leonardo and Matteo and a few others in a huddle on the far side of the playground. They are talking animatedly and turning from time to time to look at me and then returning to their discussion. Clearly I am part of whatever is going on. Leonardo is inciting them in some way against me. I can feel his hostility reaching across to me, his anger.

Ugo is waiting for me after school again, but I pretend not to notice him and go straight home. It has been raining again. After a quick lunch I put on my walking shoes and wrap myself up in warm clothes and a waterproof jacket and set out for a long walk, or as long as the island will permit. The path up the hill is very muddy with a stream running down the middle of it so that I am forced to walk on the side which has a slightly higher ridge. My shoes and socks are waterlogged within minutes and water drips off the brim of my hood onto my jacket and down my neck. It is muddy and my boots are soon heavy with clay. I stop from time to time to scrape the clay off against a pole or the support of one of the bare vines, but within seconds it is clinging to me again and hampering my progress.

When I get out onto the hilltop it grows easier. Here I have only to contend with the teeming rain and wind and I am soon soaked and cold, but it feels welcome to have bodily sensations after all those hours in the stuffy classroom. It takes me much longer to complete my usual walk and it is already growing dark by the time I reach the headland and pass by the turnoff to Villa Circe. I see lights through the trees and smoke coming from the chimney but of course no-one is outside in this weather. Only me.

But no, it is not only me.

Ugo has followed me up the hill. I had noticed him right from the beginning. I tried to ignore him at first, and walk faster and faster, but he kept following me.

At last I stop and shout at him to go home. But when I turn a short while later, there he is still straggling up behind me in the rain. In the end I sit down on a rock and wait for him to reach me. Reluctantly, hesitantly, he comes closer.

- Ugo, you are going to have to stop following me like this. Do you understand? *Capisci?*

He stares at the ground.

- I'm your teacher, not your mother. I can't help you. You have to stay with your uncle and aunt.

He doesn't move, his eyes fixed on the same spot.

- I'm not angry with you, and I would like to help you, but I can't.

Still nothing.

- What do you want from me?

Silence.

- Go away! *Vai via!*

His eyes slip across my face then drop to the ground again.

- Now I'm going to go on walking and I don't want to see you following me any more. Do you understand?

But even as I speak I know it is useless. I resume my walk and in a few minutes hear his soft footsteps repeat after mine like an echo.

It is late afternoon when I make my way home, and the shadows are long. The sky has cleared and the setting sun lights up the last few clouds, which glow furiously red and pink against the deep blue of evening. I put my rucksack over one shoulder and begin the long walk back to the village, anxious to get home before it is completely dark. The light footsteps still follow me, often stumbling, tired now, on the rough path.

But night comes early at this time of the year. The moon rises above the sea lighting my path and casting a long shadow behind me. It is pitch dark by the time I stumble down the last slope into the village. Everyone is already indoors, the sound of the news broadcast from the television set in every home disturbing the starry stillness of the night. The smell of frying garlic and tomatoes fills the alley. I open the door to my apartment and close it carefully behind me again. Home. I wonder if Ugo has found his way home safely, whether someone has given him something warm to eat, some dry clothes and a soft bed. I put my bag on the table and go to the bathroom to run a hot bath. I lie in the darkened room and soak the heat into my body, softening the stiff muscles and warming me so that I feel soft and sleepy. I wrap myself in a towel and go straight to bed where I fall into a deep sleep, a stunned hypnotic sleep full of disturbing dreams.

### **Tuesday 13 November**

Days have passed and Friday, when I will have to return to the *Questura*, is drawing nearer.

I bought some persimmons today, soft, over-ripe, swollen, autumnal fruits. I was passing through the square on my way home when my eye caught their outrageous roundness, the orange startling in the misty grey light, and I couldn't resist them. Ugo's aunt

carefully put two into a brown paper bag for me and I carried them back home, but even so, by the time I got here they had both burst open and the flesh was seeping out onto the wrapping. I put them onto a plate but it was not the same now that their perfection had been marred.

There was a parents-teachers meeting this evening, and I stayed late at school working afterwards. I had no inclination to go out into the windy town and to the loneliness of my room, preferring to stay here and mark the children's homework surrounded by the smell of chalk and ink.

When I finally stand up and stretch and prepare to leave I am surprised to notice that it is already nine o'clock. I let myself out of the side door which the *bidello* has left on the latch for me and walk along the road and into the square. It is abandoned at this time of night. The islanders retire early since they rise early to go out fishing or to work in the fields before sunrise. I have no fear alone here, there are no dangers on the island, it is too small and close-knit a community for that. A cat stands up from the shadows and approaches meowing softly. I stoop and stroke its back, and it arches its body in pleasure to follow my hand, allowing itself to be caressed. It rolls over onto its back to offer me its belly to scratch. I don't like cats very much, they feel unclean to me, but I am moved by this gesture of companionship. It isn't just that she wants her back scratched - if that were all she could have rubbed her back up against a thorn bush.

As I stand up I become aware that there is another shape in the shadows. A human shape huddled against the wall, sleeping. I strain my eyes to make out the details in the dark, reluctant to go any closer. Could it be a vagrant, perhaps a drug addict come over from the mainland? A dog? It looks too small to be human. I take a step closer and suddenly realise it is a child's shape.

I straighten up. My first reaction is to turn away, to hasten my footsteps to my room, to close my door and switch on my light. I do not want this encounter in the dark, this contact with the unexpected that might draw me in. I wish to continue my controlled orderly existence where there are no unruly feelings. I draw myself up and walk to the alley leading up the hill to where I live. Then I stop, feeling drawn to go back. I feel a huge turmoil inside me that I do not want to give in to. Eventually I take control of myself and set off up the alley. I lock and bolt the door behind me and sit down on my bed. I don't switch on the light; I just lie on my bed fully dressed. I tell myself it is nothing important, that I don't need this in

my life. Eventually I fall asleep.

### **Wednesday 14 November**

I oversleep and arrive late at school. I find it difficult to be mentally present, my eyes feel puffy and sore. The children also seem subdued and sleepy. I notice Ugo hiding behind the shoulders of the child in front of him, head bowed, from his place near the back of the classroom. It crosses my mind that it could have been him last night, but then my attention is caught by one of the other children and the thought slips away unexplored.

Slowly the morning unfolds, the register is called, the homework taken in, marked exercises returned. I wonder why I bother to take so much time writing comments and correcting errors – the children never look at them, only at the mark they have been assigned. Ugo as usual has got a four. *Insufficiente* – *insuf* as the children say. It means he has done the work but not mastered the task. Today though he has not handed in his book. I have put him next to Irene; a quiet kind girl who I hope will be able to help him a little. I keep remembering the bundle in the corner of the square last night. His clothes are dishevelled – and I notice he is wearing the same clothes as yesterday. But then he often does. The same pair of worn jeans, a faded T-shirt under his *grembiule*, a grubby bomber jacket over the top. It feels as if he has been wearing them forever.

### **Thursday 15 November**

Tomorrow I need to go over to the mainland and deal with Ispettore Lupo, but today is a public holiday. It is Remembrance Day. A platform has been erected in the square in front of the church and decked with flowers and purple drapes. People gather and stand around in little groups waiting. A misty day. The priest arrives in silver and purple robes and surrounded by choirboys and deacons. Leonardo and Matteo are amongst them dressed in white surplices. With perfect theatrical timing the priest mounts the stairs to the platform and begins to intone the *Requiem*, the mass of the dead, while the villagers kneel on the stone pebbles of the square. *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine* – Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.

*Absolve, Domine,  
animas omnium fidelium defunctorum  
ab omni vinculo delictorum*

*Dies iræ! dies illa*  
*Solvat sæclum in favilla.*  
Forgive, O Lord,  
the souls of all the faithful departed  
from all the chains of their sins  
The day of wrath, that day  
Will dissolve the world in ashes

After the Communion he descends and leads the procession of villagers down the road, the verger in front carrying the Madonna and cross, to the end of the village then up the hill in slow step, swathed in incense, a small brass band playing off key, a tuba, a trumpet, a drum keeping time. Amongst the onlookers lining the road I notice Ugo, but he turns away as I pass and I do not see his eyes.

In front of the school we stop and gather about the priest. He climbs onto a pedestal so that he is raised above our heads. All the islanders gather closer, silent now, intent. Eyes are serious, even the young men usually so full of jokes and bravado, even the young girls proud in their beauty and freshness.

The bugler plays reveille. The priest turns and begins to read the names of the islanders who fell in the two world wars from the plaque on the wall. One by one they are named, as if for roll call, surname first, then name, and all the villagers, in a single voice, in unison, repeat '*presente*', answering for the dead, giving them a voice, holding them present in their midst.

- *Ariste Achille.*
- *Presente.*
- *Bernabei Luigi.*
- *Presente*
- *Crisafulli Giovanni*
- *Presente.*

There is no rush, no sense of time passing, no sense that this is an empty formality, the villagers united in remembering their dead. All thirty-three names are read, all thirty-three are found present and accounted for. One by one. Each is there. At the end the last post is sounded. The gathering breaks apart and the people, still in procession but lighter now, fragments of conversation rising here and there, return along the sandy road to the square where tables have been prepared with wine and food ... later there will be dancing and bobbing for apples and life will resume.

I return to my room.

As one of the schoolteachers it is expected of me to take part. Part of my civic duties to the community. I hang to one side, shuffle along with the others, automatically repeating the words of the prayers I had learned as a child in boarding school, finding the Italian translation of the words natural, calming, rounded on my tongue. I had done this each year for twenty years, followed the dusty road to the cemetery, the scruffy long yellowed grass stained darker yellow in places with yellow dandelions, the smell of incense and resin from the cypress trees mixed, the sun pale on my shoulders, the movement of my hair light around my face, against my cheek, the cry of the swallows gathering swift and fast in the sky before departing. Other years I had been here, other years I had not noticed these details.

It strikes me that few people here except the very old men and women would have known any of those who died sixty-five and more years ago, except as brothers or sisters. Yet all wept for their naming, for their own death. The young mother imagining her own death, her orphaned child, her widowed husband. I try to imagine a world where I do not exist, a square, this square, without my presence, and find that the only way I can do it is by imagining myself hovering above it, the square seen from the vantage point of my eyes. It can not just exist on its own. Or perhaps it could but I can't imagine it. Can't imagine a day, with the blue sky speckled with tiny white clouds, the first intimation of rain, without feeling the cool breeze on my face, in my hair. On my body.

### **Friday 16 November**

It is Friday today and I must go and see Ispettore Lupo. The small *aliscafo* takes just over an hour for the crossing.

It is strange how little I remember of these journeys. Often it is only as I disembark again on the island after the weekend that I suddenly become aware of what is going on. Of course no-one here knows what I do when I go to the mainland, and even I find it difficult to remember the time I spend there. It's as if it were shrouded in mist, the sea passage forming a boundary between worlds. Here on the island everything is normal, controllable, measured, my emotions muted, my existence repetitive. Across the straits it is all out of control.

By four o'clock I am outside the *Questura*. It looks dirtier and more depressing than ever. This time I don't wait in the queue, but go directly along the passage to Ispettore



Lupo's office. The door is ajar. He is standing at his desk talking to another policeman. He sees me at the door and waves me in. He seems amused.

- *La Signorina P! Finalmente. L'aspettavo da tempo. Si accomodi.*

I sit on the only chair available. He looks knowingly at his colleague, then opens his drawer and pulls out the same bundle of files as the last time.

- I have come to fetch my passport. You didn't give it back to me.

- *Si, ma non abbiamo finito la nostra conversazione, vero.*

- I still don't know what you want from me. I have nothing to tell you. I have come all the way from Ponza to see you and get my passport. Please give me it to me and let me go home.

- *Certo. Ma prima dobbiamo parlare. Ha fatto la domanda al consolato?*

- No, I haven't had time to go to the consulate.

He looks at me again. There is something different in his expression now, something has shifted. His eyes flicker downwards over my body, examine me briefly, and then rise to meet mine. I feel my stomach contract.

- *Dov'era il 2 Novembre?*

- I beg your pardon? What did you say?

- *Il 2 Novembre. Dov'era.* Where were you? And what do you know of a certain Angela Cremonesi?

- I don't know where I was on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Probably at school on the island. And I've never heard that name before.

- *Mi sa che racconta bugie.*

- It's true; I do not know this person. Who is she?

- What about the *Pensione Arcadia*?

I feel myself go cold.

- No.

I look at him.

He looks back at me with his pale eyes, and then taps on the file with his index finger.

- *Ci pensi bene prima di rispondere.* Think carefully before you reply. And don't lie. *Che le bugie hanno le gambe corte.*

I don't say a word. He waits a while, but at last he clears his throat and gesticulates in irritation.

- *Allora?*

- I've told you, I don't know anything about this person. I've never heard the name before.

- *Che ne dice di questa?*

He takes a photograph from the file and shows it to me. In it I see a woman's face. It is Sabrina. I feel a shock running through me but know I must not let him notice. I stall for time.

- *La riconosci?*

- Who is she?

He stares at me piercingly. A half smile hovers about his lips. I feel obliged to repeat myself.

- Who is she?

- *Si chiama Angela Cremonesi.*

I decide to bluff my way out.

- I don't know her. There must be some mistake. I don't know this woman. I've never heard the name before. And even if I had you can't make me stay here any longer. I'm going now. Where is my passport?

- *Per ora lo tengo io. Dobbiamo parlare ancora. Torni venerdì` prossimo.*

He is playing cat and mouse games with me, I know. Why won't he give me my passport? He has a sly grin on his face.

I feel his eyes on my legs as I leave the room.

I wander down to the Roman ruins. There is a bench and I sit down. There are dozens of cats sunning themselves in the golden afternoon sunlight. I open my handbag and catch sight of a small parcel wrapped in white and silver paper. For some reason the sight of it bothers me. Without removing it from my bag I unwrap it. Inside it is a knife. I touch it, running my hand along the handle, touching the hard, cold blade. I wonder where it comes from.

A man sits down on the bench beside me, a small round man with a bald head.

- *Permesso?* he says companionably. He stretches his arm along the back of the bench. I nod although I would rather be alone. He laughs.

- *Ma guarda quei gatti.* He points and I follow the line of his finger to where two cats are mating.

The hand moves off the back of the bench and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, slips onto my shoulder.

- *Guarda come le piace.* Look at how much she likes it.

He hesitates a moment.

- *Anche a te piace?* Do you also like it?

He puts his hand on my thigh and bends closer.

- *Anche tu gridi così?* Do you also scream like that?

I don't reply.

He takes my hand and leads me to a crowded café across the road where he orders a *grappa* standing up at the counter. By now his arm is around my waist. He pays, drinks, and guides me to his car parked nearby. We get inside. He pulls me to him, already busy unbuttoning his fly, then pushes my head down into his lap. I hear him gasp as he fills my mouth.

Before he is spent we are interrupted by a traffic policeman who knocks officiously on the window and tells us to move on. He drives a short way to a park with a lake. From a public telephone booth he phones a friend and arranges to borrow his apartment for the afternoon. In exchange, he says, the friend can watch.

#### **Saturday 17 November**

#### **Sunday 18 November**

#### **Monday 19 November**

By Monday morning I am ready to go back to school although my lips are bruised and it is painful to walk. Ugo is not there. I eat two eggs and green salad. I wonder what Ugo is doing, if he will come back to school tomorrow.

#### **Tuesday 20 November**

School. Ugo is not there. I have some cheese and salad for lunch, and supper at Modugno's. Chickpea soup and veal cutlets.

#### **Wednesday 21 November**

School. English history, Henry IIIIV and his wives. In the latest box of books was a copy of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *In Praise of Folly*. I prefer the Italian title, *Elogio della Follia* – In Praise of Madness. I like the word madness better. I decide I will read that next. *Avvocato* Rossi had interesting tastes in literature; this box is a source of great delight to me. I wonder what else is in there. Perhaps this weekend I should unpack it and see what else I will find.

There was another letter from the police today but I don't let it bother me much. After school I put it on top of the fridge. I make *minestrone* soup for supper – the apartment is full of the smell of onions and vegetables.

#### **Thursday 22 November**

School. Where has Ugo gone? He has not been at school for several days now. I first noticed he was missing on Monday when I handed out the homework books and was left holding his scruffy, dog-eared one which always stood out from the others. I look carefully around the room amongst the heads bent over their work in the white electric light that struggles against the pale colourless glare that filters through the window leaving no place for shadows, just a scratchy irritable sense of exposure. I do not fill in the register until the end of the lesson in the hope that Ugo might still arrive, but at last I am forced to mark a capital A for absent against his name. I am not quite sure why I feel disturbed by this, but I do. He has never been absent before.

At the end of the day I take my register down to the office and leave a note for the secretary to call the family. The school has a policy that the family should be contacted after the third consecutive absence.

I make a detour past the vegetable market on my way to school. The stall keepers are all huddled around small braziers in the crisp morning air. I catch sight of Ugo's uncle, massive and unshaven in a frayed black and white checked pullover stamping his feet in outsize rubber boots and whistling to himself with his hands in his pockets. His face is red and unshaven, unkempt. His wife, in a faded torn overall is weighing out some tomatoes for an early customer, a mark of blood red against the grey of the morning light. They both look absorbed and I hasten my step and walk on to school without saying a word.

There is no sign of Ugo.

After lunch I go out for a walk. The weather is mild, overcast but with the clouds breaking from time to time and brilliant blue sky opening behind it. I have not done any

exercise for days and I feel quite breathless as I walk up the slope, but I soon find my second wind, as my mother used to call it. I decide to walk along the cliffs to clear my head. I know I don't have much time as the sun sets early now and I do not want to find myself stumbling about in the dark. I choose a narrow muddy path behind the village that threads its way along the edge of the fields and then begins to climb through the tangled underbrush. As always on the edges of human habitation there is an area of transition, where a discarded shoe, a shard of glass, a plastic doll, slowly decompose. I note these details as I walk, feeling distaste. But then, as I reach the top of the cliff and the horizon opens out, I breathe deeply again and take in the aromatic scent of the mimosa. I can see the path that follows across the top of the cliffs, then moves away from the sea to cut across the saddle and climb again to the highest peaks. I listen for the sound of Ugo's step but all the sound I hear is the wind snagging against the bushes and the sound of the seagulls high above calling, calling, calling.

#### **Friday 23 November**

Friday again and I know I should go to the *Questura* but I don't have the energy to take ferries and buses and negotiate the busy city streets. If *Ispettore* Lupu wants to see me he will have to come and fetch me himself.

#### **Saturday 24 November**

I am so tired, my body feels exhausted as if I had taken a great battering, yet I have done nothing out of the ordinary.

I stay up marking homework until late. I have nothing else to do. It fills the empty space between dinner and when I feel I can legitimately go to bed. I have no reason to wait until 11 o'clock to go to bed, but this has become my routine and I try not to vary it since it upsets my metabolism.

#### **Sunday 25 November**

I do not let anyone into my room. I lock it each time I leave. Even Signora Bruna does not enter.

But today Ugo knocked.

It is late in the evening, a rainy cold day, the sea and sky the colour of gunmetal. The ferry has not been able to venture into the harbour because of the high seas. I have spent

the evening as usual at Modugno's *trattoria*, I ordered *pasta e lenticchie* followed by cheese and salad. I have had more to drink than I should have and am feeling sleepy and irritable by the time I get home. I am sitting in my armchair in front of the window when suddenly I hear a gentle tapping at my door. At first I do not even recognize it as a knocking; I think it must be a branch scratching against the wall or a sound from my neighbour's room. But then it comes again, and then a third time. I pull on a jacket and go down to the street and open the door a crack. Outside, soaking wet, wild-eyed, is Ugo, teeth chattering, a black eye. As I stand in front of him there on the threshold, I see him wavering as if he were about to faint.

I don't know what to do. I can't send him back to his uncle, but nor do I want to get involved. I feel reluctant to take him to the police station, because I know I will have to make an official statement and I am afraid of the judgmental eyes of officialdom in my little world, and *Ispettore Lupo's* face flashes through my mind.

I don't know what got into me. I should have turned him away, shut the door tight, and sent him back to his uncle. I knew it would mean trouble to take him in. Yet I couldn't help myself. Something in me reached out to him and brought him inside. I put my arm around his shoulders and under his knees and carried him up to the warmth of my room.

Sigh. I bring him to my room. I remove his dirty jacket and trousers, his ragged T-Shirt. He lets me do what I want, eyes averted. I bring him a towel, and an old tracksuit of mine and I clothe him in it. It is too big for him but I suppose it doesn't matter. There is no-one to see. I take his clothes and wring them out, noticing as I do how threadbare they are, and hang them over the radiator to dry.

His body does not soften or shape itself as I move it; he remains rigid and hard, yet I know he is aware of me, is opposing me, and opposing my soft touch. I, who struggle to be soft, have to force this upon him. I shudder at the bruises and cigarette burns I discover on his arms and chest.

- Who did this?

He doesn't answer.

- Was it your uncle?

He doesn't answer.

I take a soft cloth and warm soapy water and gently wipe his limbs, his chest, his legs, trying to soothe, trying to soften the hurt. I hug his body to mine, then, fearing his reaction,

I begin to wipe his face, first his forehead, the sweatiness of his brow and up into the short cropped hair. I outline the shape of his brows, and having squeezed out the cloth with clean fresh water I wash his eyes, tenderly, afraid to give him more pain.

#### **Monday 26 November**

I go to school again this morning, leaving Ugo still asleep in my bed. I put a few biscuits on a plate for him to eat if he wakes up, but I do not have the heart to wake him myself. I find it difficult to concentrate on the lessons. There are feelings of excitement and dread rippling through me, alternating. When I get home he is gone. I stroll down to the market later and see him helping his uncle out as usual. He notices me and moves away and I do not follow. I buy some tomatoes and *scarola* from his uncle, who looks at me, small eyes unblinking, impenetrable. I wondered whether he knows. What Ugo has told him. I pay and leave. I hear him sniggering as I cross the square, but do not turn to see what it is he is laughing at.

#### **Tuesday 27 November**

I could not sleep last night.

#### **Wednesday 28 November**

I still can't sleep. I will go mad unless I sleep.

#### **Thursday 29 November**

Three days have passed, days of anxiety, of fear, yet, how can I tell you, of the stirrings of joy and life in me. All my instincts tell me I should not let him come back again, yet I know I will not be able to turn him away if he returns.

And late last night he came. I was walking home from Modugno's where I had seen his uncle drinking with his friends when I heard his soft footsteps behind me again.

- Ugo, I call without turning my head.

Silence.

The echoing footsteps falter then stop. My heart drops but I keep walking. I turn into the alleyway and then I hear them again, faster now trying to catch up, anxious not to lose me.

- Ugo, I call again.

- Come upstairs and I'll make you some chamomile tea.

Still no reply. I put the key in the lock and turn it and push open the door. As I am about to close it he appears on the doorstep looking distressed. I walk up the steep stairs, aware of his uncertain presence behind me. He comes inside. I light a candle, not wanting to frighten him with the bright neon light of the room. I hand him a bottle of birdseed and ask him to fill the feeder.

With great care and attention he lifts the cage from its hook, tongue sticking out from concentration, careful not to upset anything or hurt the little bird which flaps agitatedly but stays on her perch. He pulls out the little drawer and fills it with seed, then replaces it. He washes out the water-bowl which is quite empty and refills that too. The little bird jumps off her perch and goes to drink, sipping from the bowl and then lifting her head to swallow.

In the meantime I make some tea and toast with butter and honey. The smell of flowers fills the room.

- Come and sit down now and eat.

- *Posso far uscire l'uccellino?*

I nod, and he opens the door of the cage and puts his hand inside. With great delicacy he takes the *cardellino* in his hand and brings her out. He sits down and opens his hand. The bird does not move but eyes him curiously. He takes a bite of toast then puts a crumb on his hand and holds it out for her on his palm. The bird looks at him, then darts forward and pecks up the crumb.

- *Guarda. Hai visto*, he says excitedly. *Ha mangiato.*

- I think she likes toast.

- *Pensi che le piaccio.*

I smile.

- Of course she likes you.

We sit in silence, the three of us. He strokes the little bird's back and breast with his short stubby fingers with the nails chewed down to the quick. He is not a beautiful child but to me this evening he feels infinitely beautiful. At last it is time to go to bed.

- Where are you going to sleep tonight?

The guarded look comes over his face again. He shrugs. He puts the bird back into her cage and closes the door.

- Can you go home?



He shakes his head violently and gazes at the floor.

- What then?

For a while there is no reply, and then he mumbles:

- *Posso restare qui?* Can I stay here?

I know I shouldn't, that it will bring only trouble. But I can't send him out again to sleep in the street or to face his drunken uncle.

- Ok. But just for tonight. Ok?

He nods.

- Then help me make up the stretcher here for you.

- *Posso dormire nel tuo letto?* Can I sleep in your bed?

I can not say no.

We climb into the bed and cling there together like castaways.

### **Friday 30 November**

In the morning I wake him early and help him to get dressed. I give him a handful of biscuits and see him to the door, afraid of the watchful eye of the islanders who will read something perverse into the relationship, of this I am sure. I open the door, look up and down the alley, and check the windows. The shutters are all still closed but that doesn't mean anything - Sig.ra Bruna is an expert at spying through the cracks of closed shutters - and push him into the street. When I go to school later I see him sitting on the edge of the dock dangling his feet over the edge. He lifts his hand and waves and I waggle my fingers in return and wink. I see his face light up in a smile.

I pretend not to notice him in class but I am constantly aware of him on the periphery of my vision, the emotional centre of the room for me.

I know I should be careful. I know implicitly without even needing to think about it, that no-one should know that I have taken him in, and that he has slept in my bed. I know it must not happen again. Yet I feel such sweetness when I think of his arms around me and mine around him, his head on my shoulder.

### **Saturday 1 December**

I ate some salad and cheese.

### **Sunday 2 December**

### **Monday 3 December**

Ugo came again last night.

### **Tuesday 4 December**

### **Wednesday 5 December**

Ugo. Polenta and mushrooms.

### **Thursday 6 December**

Lentil soup and salad. I know there is something I am supposed to do tomorrow but I can't remember what it is. Ugo came.

### **Friday 7 December**

I almost forgot it is Friday and I have to go to the *Questura* after school. By the time I reach my classroom I am wide awake. I decide to take the children outside into the fresh air for their lesson. The morning is far too beautiful to waste it indoors in the stuffy centrally heated classroom. It takes longer than I thought to get them all ready in their hats and jackets and gloves. We set off at last, the children walking two-by-two holding hands, with me leading the party. Where am I going to take them? What am I going to teach them? I have no idea. I had thought of teaching them a song, perhaps *Speed Bonnie Boat*, seeing we are doing the Stuarts in history and they love singing. Singing is very good for them. It helps with their pronunciation of the often difficult English sounds. The air is so clear today that I can see the snowy white on the peaks of the mountains far in the distance across the sea. It is bitterly cold and I feel it bite into my cheeks turning them pink and my nose red. Too late I realize it is too cold for an outdoors lesson, and that anyway we would need a blackboard for me to write the words of the song on. I turn the lesson into an active clapping game instead but by now my enthusiasm and energy are waning and after a few last minutes I lead them back to the classroom that in contrast to the brightness looks even more drab and overheated than usual. I write the words of the song in big letters on the blackboard and tell them to copy it into their exercise books. They are restless now and I hear them

fidgiting and giggling behind my back, but when I turn I see only blank faces. They take ages and the bell rings while they are still copying down the words. We will have to leave the song until another day.

I put away my books and clean the board carefully, then take the register back to the office and set off home. The children are also still in the streets reluctant to go home and be inside again. I feel something hit my sleeve and look down. It is a paper bullet from a blowpipe. The boys all have them. I wonder if this came from Leonardo or Matteo. I look around quickly but no-one is taking any notice of me. All are talking or minding their own business and I am forced to just pretend that nothing has happened and carry on walking. I hasten my step now, anxious to get home and away from these hostile eyes. I climb the stairs with a sense of oppression. I pack a bag and take the ferry to Anzio.

*Ispettore* Lupo is not at the *Questura* today. His colleague tells me that he has taken a few days off work.

I have dinner in a small *trattoria* near the station and wait until 10 o'clock when I feel sure that Sabrina will be working. I walk along the porticoes. Quite a few of the women are out, mostly middle-aged women who look as if they would be more comfortable sitting at home knitting in front of the television, watching over the restless sleep of their grandchildren in the makeshift bed in the corridor. Men hover in the shadows, whether clients or protectors is not clear. I wonder if *Ispettore* Lupo is there too, watching me, wanting me, seeking my scent. It feels as if it is too late now to worry about things like that.

A car stops and Sabrina alights and the customer drives off alone into the night. It takes her a minute or so to regain her composure, to repair the shell of her face. She straightens her clothes, reapplies her smudged makeup, then turns and sees me watching her from the far pavement across the dark street. I gesture and she nods and sets off towards the *small hotel*. I follow. We slip off our clothes in the half-darkness of the room and climb into the oversoft bed. She strokes me softly, holding me tight as if I were a small child, and I find myself sobbing, my body racked with violent sobs that I can't control. I want to tell her about Ugo, about the sweetness of him, about my fear of what the islanders would say if they knew. But I know instinctively that she will also not understand, that she will also judge, and so I stay silent. Her hands keep smoothing me, defining my skin, my forms, the boundaries of my self, softly, rhythmically reconstituting my surface that feels so battered, circling my breasts and then down into those funny places, touching softly, gently, until I

feel the flood upon me. I fall asleep at last in her arms amidst the smell of sweat and damp sheets.

### **Saturday 8 December**

She is gone when I awake and I am alone. The morning light is creeping through the green shutters. I have a shower then return to the large bed where I lie propped up on the pillows like a child who has cried herself out. Then, feeling numb, I pull on my clothes that still carry the smell of rancid oil from last night's restaurant. I step into my damp shoes, put my bag over my shoulder and open the door. The owner is sweeping the hallway. I step over a used condom, and recover my identity card from the chain-smoking concierge who is listening to the soccer on a tiny transistor radio.

I catch a passing bus and, as it trundles heavily in front of a church, on a sudden whim I press the button to tell the driver I want to get off. I walk back to the church and push open the door. It is dark inside, only a few candles flickering below an *ex-voto* painting of the Madonna and Child. I sit down on a pew at the back wondering what on earth I am doing here.

I become aware in the silence and dark that I am not alone, that above me in the shadows someone is moving. I listen carefully, it sounds as if whoever it is, is turning pages. Then I hear a squeaking puffing sound.

The music starts, slow and soft. How do I describe what it sounds like to hear an organ in a darkened church unexpectedly? I sit back in the pew and close my eyes. The man above me, for I have decided it must be a man from the energy with which he plays, fumbles, stops, clears his throat, then goes back to the beginning of the bar and tries again. Again at the same place in the music his fingers falter and get stuck, again he stops and goes back. How well I remember just that, the striving for perfection, for the note to be just right. I feel tears streaming down my face and I am glad it is dark and no-one can see me.

My eyes settle back on the Madonna and child in the dark chapel above me. All but one of the candles has gone out. I stand up, take some money from my purse and put it into the offerings box. I take three candles and light them from the spluttering remains of the last candle. The painting lights up in the flickering golden light. My thoughts go to Ugo.

How many hours have I been sitting there? I have no idea. The organist has long since gone, it is dark outside. The rain has stopped and the air is soft and warm and fragrant. It

feels full of promise. Dolphins accompany our little vessel back across the strait to Ponza, gleaming white in the moonlight as their backs surface alongside the boat. They seem to be playing with us as they swim around and under the hull, or surf behind us in our wake. I remember stories of shipwrecked sailors being saved and carried to shore by these creatures and I feel my chest and throat opening with love and wonder at the beauty of the natural world. They turn back as we pass the breakwater and round the light at the end of the harbor wall. It is late and there are only a few stragglers to meet us, but I see a childish form flit aside in the shadows and make out Ugo's crew-cut and round face. I collect my bags and come ashore. I know he is waiting for me, and that he will follow me. I pretend not to notice him, but find myself smiling to myself as I walk along the jetty and up the *Lungomare* to the village.

### **Sunday 9 December**

We spend the day quietly together reading and telling each other stories. In the evening after dinner I send him home.

### **Monday 10 December**

The alarm clock wakes me as usual. It is still dark and will stay dark until after I have got to school, I know. The weather has changed and a thin cold wind from Siberia has started blowing across the sea. It seems to manage to penetrate through the bricks of the walls, through the chinks in the plaster, and I shiver as I pull on my clothes, warm woollen polo-necked sweater and warm trousers, boots, a heavy jacket and gloves. I would wear a hat too, but can't find it, so I give up at the last minute and go out bareheaded. The cold catches my cheeks and filters down the neck of my jacket, then is stopped by the collar of my sweater. My cheeks are pink, I am sure, by the time I reach my classroom.

The room is overheated and stuffy, but I don't dare open the windows for fear that one of the children might catch cold. I sit at my desk and give them a dictation, the longest I can find to take up the whole lesson. It is a passage from P.G. Wodehouse from their books. The children keep interrupting, wanting me to repeat what I have just read, clearly struggling to understand and reproduce the sounds. I wonder what they can be making of Jeeves, of this fictitious world so very remote from their own, or from mine either.

I read the lines slowly, repeating the chunks of words twice to allow them time to write in between, so making it even more incomprehensible:

*"I marmaladed / a slice of toast / with something of / a flourish, / and I don't suppose / I have ever come / much closer to saying / "Tra-la-la" / as I did the lathering, / for I was feeling / in mid-season form / this morning. / God, / as I once heard Jeeves put it, / was in His heaven / and all right / with the world. / (He added, / I remember, / some guff / about larks and snails, / but that / is a side issue / and need not detain us.) /*

*"It is no secret / in the circles / in which he moves / that Bertram Wooster, / though as glamorous / as one could wish / when night has fallen / and the revels get under way, / is seldom / a ball of fire / at the breakfast table. / Confronted with the eggs / and b., / he tends to pick / cautiously at them, / as if afraid / they may leap / from the plate / and snap at him. / Listless / about sums it up. / Not much bounce / to the ounce. /*

*"But today / vastly different conditions / had prevailed. / All had been verve, / if that's the word I want, / and animation. / Well, / when I tell you / that after sailing through / a couple of sausages / like a tiger of the jungle / tucking into its luncheon coolie / I was now, / as indicated, / about to tackle / the toast and marmalade, / I fancy / I need say no more. /*

I contemplate, wonder briefly if the people who compile these text books understand what they are putting into them. Who on earth would choose this passage, and for what possible reason?

The morning drags by in a sequence of dreary disappointments, repetitions of other mornings almost identical to this one, almost but not quite, of boredom and irritation and resentment. All the feelings of love and hope that I felt yesterday have evaporated, leaving just a scratchy irritability in its place. At last the final bell rings. I pack up my books, clean the blackboard, put away the chalk and leave the room. I drop the register off in the office. The headmaster is there with Cappi. They fall silent as I enter. The headmaster nods at me, then watches me wordlessly as I pack away the register and leave.

It is still freezing cold outside, the difference from the day before as extreme as if I had flown to a different continent. The sky is dark and heavy with clouds, and the sea heaves with long submerged currents although the surface is not broken and lies opaque and

unreflecting like an oil slick over the water. I need some fresh air after hours confined in the overheated room so I walk out onto the breakwater breathing in the cold damp iodine smell but even that is not enough to budge me out of the sense of stifling claustrophobia that grips my chest and diaphragm. I linger there for a while until it grows too cold for me to stay any longer and I walk back to my apartment. There's a note, in large, childish handwriting stuck to my door.

- *Troia*.

- Slut.

### **Tuesday 11 December**

I am sure it must be Leonardo. What does he know? Can he have seen Ugo arriving at my apartment or leaving in the morning? I close my shutters tight and go to bed early.

### **Wednesday 12 December**

A violent storm with white sheets of lightning shatters across the sky and the sea is very wild. Huge waves crash against the breakwater and thunder through my dreams. Several of the little boats break their moorings in the night and are dragged out to sea which sucks and pulls at the rocks. Dark currents swirl perilously just below the surface as if there were huge monsters moving in the watery blackness. The lighthouse on the point howls mournfully as its light spins round and round trying to penetrate the gloom.

A body was washed up on the rocks this morning, in the seaweed, sucked down, tugged down, hair afloat, stomach awash.

Like everyone else, I go to see. An illegal immigrant on a night crossing from North Africa, full of hope for a better future, or perhaps a prostitute after a quarrel with a client. Waves lapping gently rock the body, protective tattoos cut into her cheeks and forehead, body naked, loose belly with the dark shadow of pubic hair. I watch as the rescue workers lift the limp form onto the stretcher, an arm trailing lifelessly over the side, seaweed slicked over her face. I want to remove it so she can breathe again, but it will take more, much more than that to make her breathe. First she will need to dissolve, to disintegrate, her organs disintegrating, the cells decomposing, the molecules separating and then being reabsorbed, to regenerate in some other form, perhaps as air, perhaps as a rain cloud, an ice crystal frozen for all eternity. I sit on a rock and watch, the waves lap-lapping at my feet.

I feel life through my flesh but also death as I feel the shame of her public nakedness when her thighs fall apart and the boys giggle, excited and aroused at her exposure.

Waves generated by the pull of wind and moon, generate degenerate. The salty smell, the seaweed smell, the smell of breaking waters, returning to the amniotic waters, to the holding, floating warmth, the lungs filled with fluid. Sightless eyes, there is nothing to see, tiny fishes have nibbled her nose, her eyes, her lips, featureless foetal face, flat, white, bloodless.

She has no longer any connection, no umbilical cord attaching her to a life source.

#### **Thursday 13 December**

The stranger left this morning.

I am sitting in my classroom in exactly the same position as when he arrived last month. That feels like a lifetime away, a world of innocence. So much seems to have happened in the meantime. The taxi re-deposits him with his suitcases on the jetty where the ferry is already waiting to depart. With a strange indifference I watch him go, as if he no longer has any part in my life. And indeed it is many days since I last thought of him. I wonder about that. It is since Ugo came.

I also received a phone call from *Ispettore Lupo*. There is something about his voice that alarms me, although I can't pin it down. He says he wants to see me, asks me to come back tomorrow. Polite. Cold. Not bullying.

I am not hungry.

#### **Friday 14 December**

At the *Questura* *Ispettore Lupo* is sitting at his desk and appears to be waiting for me. My file is open in front of him and he is squinting at one of the pages in the yellow light of the small desk lamp. His movements are as slow and spiderlike as on the previous occasion, but I sense an excitement beneath the surface that worries me.

- *Ah, e` Lei. L'aspettavo.*

I nod in greeting and sit down on the chair in front of him. He stares at me for a moment, then his eyes drop to my chest.

- *Non Le ho detto l'altra volta, ma abbiamo chiesto il Nulla Osta alle autorità sudafricane.* We have asked the consulate for your police record. They say it will take about



two months. Of course you understand that this is just a routine check. You have nothing to worry about.

He looks at me again with that thin-lipped smile.

- Do you?

- Do I what?

- Have anything to worry about?

I don't answer. I don't know where this is leading.

- *La Pensione Arcadia? Che cosa ne sa?*

- I've never heard the name before.

He looks at me intently.

- *Ma e` proprio sicura? Are you sure?*

Again I don't reply.

- *Ci risulta che Lei ha affittato una stanza per qualche ora in un albergo di questo nome vicino alla Stazione Termini. Ora si ricorda? Il 18 Novembre.* You rented a room at the Pensione Arcadia near the station on the 18<sup>th</sup> November. Your name was in the register.

- I don't remember, but what if I did? What is it to you? Where are you trying to go with this?

- *Stia attenta, signorina. Mi risponda con cura, mi raccomando.*

- Perhaps I was there. I don't remember. I sometimes spend the night in Rome and take a room in a pensione. I don't always take note of the name. I just go to the first one I find.

- *Ma e` proprio sicura? Ha pensato bene?*

- Why do you want to know?

- A man died there that night. The hotel manager. His body was found on the stairs the next morning. *Era morto.* We suspect it was not an accident. We are making contact with everyone who spent the night in the pensione. *E allora mi dica,* did you see or hear anything?

- No.

- You mean you remember being there but no, you didn't hear anything?

- No, I don't remember anything.

And it is true. I don't remember anything. I feel a sense of panic rise in me. If my name was in the register I must have been there. But I have no memory of it. And if I don't, who did spend the night there? But I don't want this policeman investigating. I feel deeply

disturbed by the conversation. What does this man know about me? We continue for a few more minutes, then he tells me I can leave. He tells me to return next Friday after we have both given the matter some thought. He tells me not to leave Italy until I have spoken to him again. I think he is just trying to scare me but I don't really know. He still hasn't returned my passport.

Ispettore Lupo's questions and insinuations trouble me. I walk past the *Pensione Arcadia* on my way back. It still feels familiar to me, but I still have no memory of it. I make my way to the nearest bar across the street from which I can see the entrance. There is only one small round table with two chairs squashed up in the corner. I sit down. There are coffee stains and spilt sugar on the formica table top. I order some tea and open the well-paged copy of *La Repubblica* in front of me to avoid having to meet anyone's eyes or exchange banter with the barman.

I know I have been there before.

I try to imagine what it would be like if I rang the bell of the *pensione* and went through the door off the street.

I can picture it clearly. I know the door will open onto a deep, high-ceilinged echoing hallway with an ancient lift shaft in a metal cage at the far end. Five wide stone steps will lead up to the left. At the top will be a glass door with the words *Pensione Arcadia* embossed on it in chipped gold letters. If you open the door, a little bell will ring somewhere in the recesses of the building. There will be a residual ingrained smell of tomatoes and garlic over another slightly mouldy smell of badly dried linen. There will be a desk and a row of pigeonholes against the wall, each with a number, some with the room keys hanging below the number, the patron no doubt sleeping late, still occupying the room. There will be, I know it, a brass bell on the counter to call someone's attention, although your presence has already been signalled by the bell triggered as you crossed the threshold. If you go back out onto the landing, you will be able to choose either to take the lift up to your level, or to climb the narrow flight of grimy stairs as it spirals around the lift shaft, up to your room. When you reach the landing, there will be four doors. Yours is the one on the right, at the head of the stairs.

Can I prove myself wrong? Should I go in and see whether this could be true? I could ring the bell and speak to the concierge, ask if he recognises me, find an excuse to look around,

tell him that I lost an earring, could it still be in the room under the bed perhaps? Hopefully he will take me up.

Yet how can I tell you what dread I feel. What if it is as I say? What if he does recognise me? Then I will have to face up to the knowledge that I am not able to remember. That my body was there although I was not. I decide that I do not want that certainty. There are levels of truth that I find unbearable. I pay for my tea and go out into the street, determined to return to the station.

But somehow I find myself retracing my steps along the pavement until I am standing outside the *Pensione Arcadia* once more, my hand raised to press the bell. I hesitate for a moment, but only for a moment do I manage to wrest control over myself, then my finger presses the white porcelain knob and I stand waiting in the leaden cold. A woman's voice rasps through a microphone.

- *Chi è?*

I mumble something in reply and the door clicks open.

I push open the heavy wooden door, pass inside and let it go with a slam at my shoulders. I am in a dark deep hallway, with the lift shaft at the end exactly where I knew it would be. With a heavy heart I climb the five shallow stone steps to the left and push open the glass door. I recognize the smell. I recognise the little bell on the counter, the row of pigeonholes against the wall.

A woman is standing waiting. A woman about forty, plump, with angry suspicious looking eyes, dressed in black, a few black hairs sprouting from her upper lip and chin. I know her face but can remember nothing about her. I had not expected her. I am not sure whether I have seen her before. I have a faint recollection of a man, middle aged with a paunch, then the image wobbles and fades. I try to clutch at it but it is gone.

- *Mi dica*, the woman says curtly.

I quickly invent a story. I explain that I stayed here a few weeks ago, that I lost my ring.

- Has anything been found?

- No.

- There was a man here. Can I speak to him?

She interrupts me at once.

- *Non c'è*. He's not here.

- Will he be back later?
- *Non c'è*, she repeats. *E' morto.*

I understand that she is not prepared to say anything more.

I thank her and leave, the heavy door slams behind me with a bang.

### **Saturday 15 December**

### **Sunday 16 December**

I spend a restless night tossing and turning in my bed. Whenever I fall asleep I have ragged dreams, from which I awaken gasping, of gaping laughing mouths, tongues poking in and out obscenely, eyes mocking and cruel. I feel sure that there was someone watching me in the alley the other night when I opened the door to the child.

Who was it and what could he know about me? Even if it was *Ispettore* Lupo he could only track my outer life. He would still know nothing about my private thoughts, or anything about the boy. But I don't know what information he could get from the South African authorities. What would they know of my inner world? What records do the doctors, the police, store from those times of which I have no memory? Towards morning I fall into a deep sleep, so deep that I don't hear my alarm clock, or the morning sounds of the harbour.

### **Monday 17**

I startle awake a few minutes before the school bell and drag on my clothes. I hear the bell ring as I rush down the alley and across the square. The children are already inside. I stop at the door. I have never seen them so animated. The boys have fabricated a ball of paper and sticky tape and are playing a kind of basketball between the desks. The girls are banging on the wooden desk tops with their open hands as an accompaniment to a song they are singing in chorus, over and over.

*Sant'Antonio, Sant'Antonio*

*Il nemico del demonio.*

Without pausing, and increasing the tempo and volume they sing it again.

*Sant'Antonio, Sant'Antonio*

*Il nemico del demonio.*

The noise is deafening and they don't notice my arrival at the door. It is only when I cross the room to the podium that they become aware of my presence.

They slowly settle, scrutinising me carefully for signs of anger or retaliation. I lean against the lectern watching them. A tense silence falls. I let it lie there between us, enjoying their fear. At last I tell them to sit.

The lesson falls into its usual pattern and homework is distributed; I repeat my explanation of the working of the adjective in English and its position in relation to the noun. I notice the stifled yawns, the dull eyes. I send one of the children to the office to fetch the register. She returns holding the big green book and an envelope for me. I glance at it quickly. Just a plain white envelope with nothing written on it. I ask the child:

- Who gave you this?

She shrugs and looks at me sullenly, without understanding. I repeat my question in Italian.

- *Da dove viene?*

She points down the corridor and giggles with embarrassment, but still says nothing. I give up.

After the morning's lessons, I sit at my desk feeling limp and exhausted. I take the envelope between my fingers and turn it over, but it is blank. Eventually I take a pencil and slit it open carefully. Inside is a sheet of paper and a photograph. I have a horrible feeling about the photograph and quickly place it face down on the table. With a sense of foreboding I open the letter. Blank. No name. No signature. No possibility of reply. I feel my heart beating fast. With trembling fingers I turned over the photograph. A grainy black and white image, but there is no mistaking the faces. Ugo and I stand in the alley as I unlock the door into my apartment. I have an anxious look on my face.

I tear the photograph into tiny pieces and place them back inside the envelope.

I tell Ugo he must not come again. Ever. I see his face go drain of blood and he reels out of the classroom.

### **Tuesday 18 December**

What I knew would happen all along has finally come to pass. It could not have come at a worse time.

The headmaster sent one of the pupils to my classroom this morning with a message asking me to come to his office during the lunch break. When I enter he is sitting at his vast

polished desk with the Italian flag to one side. He half rises, nods me to take a chair on the other side of the desk, then lowers himself carefully to the edge of his seat and clears his throat.

He goes about the matter with great circumstance and self-importance, puffing himself up, filling himself with the words. He speaks about the Ministry in Rome, about the *Provveditorato*, about *IRRSAE*. About policy regarding qualifications, unions, board examinations, the democratic values of the republic, language policy. At last he comes to the matter at hand.

A teacher has been appointed – a person of the highest calibre, you understand. A real teacher. He will be arriving at the end of the month. From the first of January my services will no longer be required. He wants to take this opportunity to thank me for all my years of hard work, what was it, five, six years? He seems surprised when I tell him it is almost twenty. As a temporary teacher I have always existed only on the periphery of his vision, a shadow without clear outline or colour.

He gets up and accompanies me to the door.

I come back to my empty classroom. The children are still outside playing in the pale winter sunshine. The air is stuffy. I stand at the window looking out at the playground and the hills beyond, my eyes unfocused. Strange that I can feel so indifferent.

The afternoon goes by in a haze. Ugo is not in class. I give the children an exercise to keep them busy and myself from needing to engage with them.

It is growing dark by the time I leave the school buildings and make my way up the narrow streets to the old town where I lodge. It feels like years since I was last here. I go upstairs and lie down on my back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. A fly is circling round and round the naked light bulb that hangs blankly from its wire. The eyes in the paintings that surround me leer at me mockingly. I feel my head spinning and my stomach lurches. I try to turn over but the room sways about me. I try to get to the bathroom, but all I can do is slip off the bed onto the cold tile floor and attempt to crawl there, but then the floor feels so cool and my body so hot that I just lie down and let myself go.

It is night time when I awake, still lying on the cold floor, my body stiff and frozen. I try to get up but my head throbs violently and at last I give up. I am afraid I am very sick, that I need a doctor, that I am going to die, but the thoughts just keep slipping away. I have a sudden image of a long dormitory with rows of beds marching down each side of the room,

each bed below a high barred window, the moonlight shining through, casting barred shadows across the beds and over the sleeping drugged bodies of the women lying there. I don't know how long I lie there. I know that at some point I get up and wash and make some tea and go back to bed and do not move again that day. By the afternoon I feel a little better. I eat some dried biscuits and tea, and by evening am able to sit at my armchair at the window and gaze out at the rain that is teeming down onto the rooftops. I take up the *Diario* which is lying open next to the chair and begin to read listlessly.

Tuesday evening I felt all weak and I ate a rosemary bread and an omelette and salad and some dried figs.

Wednesday, I fasted.

Thursday evening, a rosemary loaf, an omelette with one egg, and a salad and four ounces of bread altogether.

Friday evening salad, pea soup and an omelette and five ounces of bread.

Saturday butter, salad, sugar and an omelette.

Sunday the 1<sup>st</sup> April I had lunch with Bronzino and I did not eat in the evening.

Monday evening I had steamed bread with butter, an omelette and two ounces of cake.

Tuesday.

Wednesday.

Thursday.

Friday.

On Saturday I went to the tavern; salad and omelette and cheese. I felt good.

I think I have already read these pages but I'm not sure. It doesn't really matter. Did Pontormo also lose days?

So many of my days pass with nothing to say for themselves when I can't even remember what I have eaten, I can remember no sensations, no thoughts. I presume I must have lived through them but nothing remains to me of them. How little of my life I have actually lived. How little I remember of the books I have read, of the people I have known

### **Thursday 19 December**

I force myself to get up and go to Modugno's for supper, but the food turns dry in my mouth and I can't swallow it. I leave early. As I do, Ugo's uncle, red-faced and uncertain on his feet, staggers across the square from the bar on the corner where he has been drinking and playing *briscola* since early morning, shouting as he throws down his cards. I see him

stagger up the alley, uncertain on his feet. I see him stop and support himself on the wall. I see him fumble with his fly and urinate against the wall then stagger on. I hear the door slam behind him as he enters the house next door. I hear his shouts in the next-door apartment, his wife's voice shrill in reply. I hear bangs and the sound of things smashing, and I hear her scream. I hear his voice roaring over the top of everything. Then silence.

I huddle at my window hardly daring to breathe, feeling his voice penetrate my skull, his animal howls and moans inside me, flames and fire and roaring waters and darkness. Out of it all Ugo arrives at my door.

- *Posso entrare?* he asks. He is breathless and wild-eyed.

- Ugo, you know you mustn't. I told you not to come.

He looks at me imploringly.

- *Mi fara' male.*

I feel my resolve begin to waver.

- *Ti prego. Solo questa volta.*

- Just this time then, I whisper, but never again. Come in child.

Soundlessly I take him in, soundlessly caress and soothe and clean the wounds.

- Did your uncle do this to you?

He doesn't reply.

I take him into my bed and hold him tight and we lie there clinging to each other like two lost children in the dark. I hear his breath grow quiet and even and shallow and I try to give him a rhythm with my own, slow and calm, as I used to do with my father as a child, to help his release into the arms of sleep, and by doing so I too am caught in its embrace until at last we lie there together, side by side, at peace.

### **Friday 20 December**

School has broken up today for the Christmas break. The children rush out into the streets after the last bell as if they have been trapped for months, as I suppose they have. And I have been the prison keeper.

I need to go to the *Questura*, so I decide to spend a night in Rome and try to get to the queue early before it is too long.

What has happened is difficult to even start to put it into words.



I remember catching the ferry over to the mainland. I remember standing on the deck, and smelling the damp salty breeze blowing across the water against my face, the oily leaden smell of diesel smoke as the heavy vessel slowed to manoeuvre in the harbour. I remember coming down the gangplank onto the jetty and waiting for a taxi, since the buses were on strike. I remember standing there feeling very conspicuous. I remember a man in a custard-coloured *Cinquecento* who stopped and offered me a lift. I remember squeezing into the front seat next to him. I remember the way his lips curled off his teeth as he smiled at me. I remember a joke, his hand slapping my knee, a gesture of friendship. And then the fingers moved and the gesture shifted into something else, the meaning now different, the hand, the hairy square fingers on my pale knee the same as before when he slapped me in mirth, but the fingers kneading, now moving up, under the edge of my skirt, and I just watching, and he looked at me then turned off the main road into a country lane.

I remember lying on my back under the trees and the leaves slowly tumbling through invisible currents, floating, sighing, hovering, golden sunlight and leaves and shade shifting slowly in the gentle autumn breeze – no, not a breeze, no wind at all, yet the leaves still moved, as if of their own accord, perhaps there was a breeze higher up, but here where I lay there was none, the broken chestnut shells from former years poking into my back, the soft, loamy earth cushioning my body. When he had done I turned over onto my side and curled up into a ball. There was a faint smell of mushrooms; I imagined mycelium, thin threadlike white filaments spreading, growing underground, hidden, unseen across the underworld, reaching out little fingers to continue its life, to find nurturance from the dead leaves, the life of past years. Leaves and mud and water and insects and worms, this underworld of which I was a part.

But there are also leaves drifting down from the tall trees, the wide open generous branches and rounded trunks of the chestnut trees, the abundant fruit they offer each autumn, polished rich red-brown roundnesses, each one perfect and full and pregnant with new life. To melt into them, become one with them, meaning in the teaming abundance of nature, not in the disjointed singularity of the vertical event.

**Sat 22 December**

**Sun 23 December**

Something happened, I am sure. But I don't know what it was. I wish I could remember. It is hovering on the edge of my consciousness, like a dream that I just can't catch hold of. I know that I can't tackle it directly, that is not how dreams work. I will have to wait for it, attentive, pretending to look the other way so as not to frighten it back into hiding.

I get up and put on a pot of coffee and stand waiting in front of the stove while it heats and percolates, enough to distract my mind from pursuing the memory actively, leaving enough space for images to arise. Something brushes through the undergrowth of my thoughts. A mouse? A snake? I clutch at it but it is already gone. I stand rocking gently, there it is again, dry leaves, rustling, rustling, floating down, I am lying on a bed of dried leaves in a forest, in a wood, soft humus under me, warm and fragrant, a scent of green things, growing things, decay, of mould and mushrooms, secret tunnels, aerated underground passages. I lie there abandoned, my clothes loosened, my skirt about my waist, my thighs open. The sun sparkles down through the falling leaves, golden and orange and red. Beside me is a man, lying face down, half across my body, a lover perhaps asleep after sating his passion. I turn my head to look at him and see blood seeping through his clothes down into the soft warm earth beneath us. I see three wounds across his back, puckered and dark, almost black against his navy shirt. I push him off me, his body lifeless, and get to my feet. I see a knife in the grass. I brush the leaves from my clothes and hair and straighten my clothes. I look around. I see a small mustard-coloured *Cinquecento* on the edge of the clearing.

The coffee is percolating rapidly, noisily, almost a scream. I pour a big mug of coffee and put in lots of sugar – I want to be awake and alert to follow this line of thought. I carry it over to my seat at the window and sit down, wrapping my dressing gown around me for warmth. I take a sip and look out across the rooftops. The big ferry is pulling up the gangplank. It hoots twice and slowly moves away from its moorings leaving a white trail behind it in the water. It will be back in a few hours. It manoeuvres slowly out of the harbour and as it passes the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater, it speeds up. Where is it going? Probably *Ventotene*, where there is a prison built to resemble Dante's *Inferno*, with concentric rings leading down to a pit in the centre. What happens in that pit, I wonder.

I sip my coffee. It is ice cold and I become aware that my feet are freezing on the bare tiles and my whole body is tense. I go back to the stove. My eyes fall on the clock above the fridge. It is evening. What have I done all day? I look out of the window. The ferry is just

leaving. I see the gangplank being hoisted, hear the hooter blast three times and see the water turn white where the huge propeller churns it as it moves away from the jetty.

**Mon 24 December**

**Tues 25 December**

Christmas Day

**Wed 26 December**

My diary has no entries for many days, days of nothing. I don't remember whether I have been at school, whether I have eaten or slept or walked out. All around the walls are paintings I have not seen before. Black. Canvas after canvas of thick clotted black paint.

Masses of black birds, clotted together in varying degrees of liquefaction, some putrified into a seeping gelatinous mass.

**Thurs 27 December**

Eggs and salad

**Friday 28 December**

I walked to the headland but it was very cold and my head began to ache so I turned back and came home.

**Saturday 29 December**

**Saturday 30 December**

Last night Ugo came again. When I wake up in the morning he is gone. I wonder for a moment if I have imagined everything, but then I notice the faint outline of his body on the sheets beside me and I know that it was true.

I wish Ugo and me could go away somewhere, just the two of us, far away from prying eyes and hurtful people. We could be happy by ourselves, I think.

## Sunday 31 December

New Year's Eve

## Monday 1 January

## Tuesday 2 January

I go to see a doctor, someone I don't know in the capital, just an anonymous name on a plaque outside an anonymous building. I take a number and sit in the waiting room as one patient after another enters his room and emerges a few minutes later holding a prescription. At last my number is called. Through the doorway I can see Dottor Montalti sitting behind his desk, a large overweight man with a beard, wearing a white doctor's coat that is too tight over his suit. He looks irritable, overworked and depressed. He does not rise when I enter but points to a chair. I sit.

- *Mi dica.*

I hesitate for a moment, and he drops the pen and glares at me irritably.

- *Allora, cos'ha che non va? Si sente male?*

There is no way I can even begin to tell him what my fears are. But I force myself to try. I have come so far.

- No, I'm not sick. I think I'm losing my memory. My mind. There are things in my mind that I can't explain and things I can't remember that I am sure I must have done.

He barely registers what I am saying. I see no flicker even of interest in his eyes.

- *Ah. Allora devi andare dallo specialista in malattie nervose. Lo psichiatra.* The psychiatrist. You must go to the psychiatrist.

He punctuates the word carefully, tapping his index finger on his desk to reinforce my memory.

- *Psy-chi-a-trist. Ecco, ti do una lettera.* He has shifted, imperceptibly, into the familiar form. *Tu.* I no longer deserve the more respectful *Lei*.

He writes, tears off the page and passes it to me. I understand that the appointment is over. I leave the room and walk down the stairs to the street. At the hospital there is another long queue to make an appointment. The first date they can give me is in two months' time. I drop the appointment card in the rubbish bin at the door as I leave. I can't wait that long.

### **Wednesday 3 January**

I hear the municipal workers in the street collecting garbage, shouting to each other as they hoist the *cassonetti* up and empty them into the jaws of the garbage truck, mechanical sounds and human disturbing the midmorning peace. I realise that I am never here at this time of the morning, always at school, always my attention held by the activities of the classroom, the children, oblivious to the sounds coming from the outside, the world where shade and sunlight shift slowly across the houses and bay from hour to hour, subtly transforming them in ways I do not know. It crosses my mind that soon I will always be free in the mornings and the routine of bells and lessons will no longer punctuate my day. How will I fill my time then? What will give meaning to my existence?

I remember how as a child I never knew the sounds and smells of the weekday mornings. I never missed a day of school – until my father died. Every year I received a certificate of good attendance.

I look out of my window. It has been raining all morning, and it is now clearing slightly from the west, and beams of light pierce the clouds and shine on the slanting rain where it falls on the sea and disappears. As children we would call this a monkey's wedding, it brings back memories of damp clothes steaming in the sudden unexpected sunlight, warm and wet at the same time. I often used to wonder at the name, wondering whether monkeys really mated, or had courtship rituals in these times of confusion. As a child I used to imagine a girl monkey dressed in white posing for a photographer as the rain poured down and sunlight played about her shoulders.

It is difficult to see far, the mainland is shrouded in mist. Only here, nearby, does the play of light on rain relieve the monotony of the greyness, and I know that it will soon close in again to a solid downpour. I feel glad that I have taken the day off and can lie in my bed, dry and comfortable.

### **Thursday 4 January**

I have been painting again, but differently now. I am not painting eyes anymore. Now I squeeze paint onto the canvas, burnt Siena and burnt orange as a base, then I cover it over with thick black paint, clotted lumps of it, and with the nail of my forefinger I scratch deep into the blackness, the scratch lines revealing the dark bitter red tones below.

### Friday 5 January

### Saturday 6 January

### Sunday 7 January

Today is *la Befana*. Epiphany. The end of the holidays. Tomorrow I must go back to school.

I know I have been to the mainland again. I found the torn stub of the ferry ticket in my waste paper basket yesterday. But I don't remember going there. I am so afraid. I have been watching other people's expressions to see if they notice anything strange about me. I am very careful what I say.

I also found a knife in my handbag, wrapped in wedding gift paper, silver wedding bells on a white background and the words *Tanti Auguri* written over and over again. I unwrap it slowly and draw it from its sheath. The blade is shiny, lethal. I draw it against my thumb, perhaps willing it to be obtuse and blunt, but a line of red blood springs up immediately and I stop. It is sharp. I wrap it up again carefully and replace it in my bag.

### Monday 8 January

Everything seems to be coming in bits and pieces now. There is no continuity. I spend all my free time in my room, uncertain of what will happen if I go out. I have examined these paintings again and again, but I have absolutely no memory of having painted them. How is that possible? If I didn't, then who did?

A sense of panic rises in me as I try to grasp the meaning of this. It feels as if everything inside me, everything I know about myself, is unreal. I can't bear to stay here in my room, losing myself in these thoughts. I feel a desperate need to get into my body, to find at least a physical sense of wholeness. I set off up the hill even though it is already late in the day, but I soon come into the mist, thick swirling white sheets of mist that surround and envelope me, cold and wet against my face and hands, and I remember faces and sounds from long ago as if they were with me here now, I see my dog, Manfred, dead years back, come bounding down the path out of the mist, warm brown eyes full of love for me, and I am about to bend down and embrace him but he slides away past me and is gone. And I see my mother, firm and young and pretty, laughing at a joke, and then she sweeps past me too and dissolves into nothing.

### **Tuesday 9 January**

I have stopped marking the children's homework. I just can't find the energy anymore, now that I know it is all coming to an end.

I feel restless. I need to move, I can't sit still, I walk and walk the full extent of the island, but it is too small, it takes me hours to walk to the end and back and still this feeling of seething restlessness grips me and I set out for another turn. I can take it no longer and after school on Friday evening I will catch the ferry back to the mainland.

### **Wednesday 10 January**

Sig. Cappi tells me that there have been three phone calls from a certain *Ispettore* Lupo at the *Questura* in Rome. He says that *Ispettore* Lupo is expecting me at the *Questura* on Friday. He looks at me quizzically. His face is kind and I wish I could tell him about it all, but there is just too much. I feel strangely indifferent.

### **Thursday 11 January**

### **Friday 12 January**

I know the way to the *Questura* so well already, I could go there in my sleep. The policeman at the door recognises me, I can see from his eyes, but he does not greet me. Perhaps he has orders to be severe, impassive. I tidy my hair and put on some lipstick as I stand and wait for the lift, determined this time to sort things out with *Ispettore Lupo* once and for all. He is in his office sitting at his desk, staring blankly out of the window. I tap on his door. He smiles to see me, but it is not a smile I want to see. I sit down.

He goes straight to the point:

- *E` stata indaffarata, vero? You've been busy.-Allora, si e` decisa a dire la verita`?*

- You showed me a picture of a woman.

He nods imperceptibly.

- I have been thinking. Yes, I do know her, but I don't know her name. But what I do with her is my own private business. It has nothing to do with the police.

- *La donna e` una, come si dice, una donna di facile costume. A woman of easy virtue? Insomma, una prostituta.*

I don't reply.

- *Ma cosa fate insieme? Ti piacciono le donne?* What do you do together? Do you like women?

There is an edge of excitement in his voice which I pretend not to hear. I still say nothing.

- *Mah. Bisognerebbe sentire il Buoncostume. Però c'è un'altra storia qui.*

He pulls out the file again, the one I am beginning to know so well. There is the photo of Sabrina again, but there are also two new photos, one of Ugo and one of a mustard coloured *Cinquecento*. I breathe deeply. There is no longer any use hiding.

- I think you need to tell us what you know. What do you know about this man? *Si spiega.*

- If it is the person I think you are talking about, he gave me a lift a few weeks ago. There was a strike and I couldn't get into town.

- *Il 20 dicembre c'era lo sciopero.* The strike was on 20<sup>th</sup> December. His body was found on the 21<sup>st</sup> in the woods at Ostia.

- I don't know. I can't remember.

- *Ci deve dire quello che sa.*

His attendant knocks on the door, salutes and addresses *Ispettore Lupo*.

- *Il capo l'aspetta in Direzione.*

He looks at me.

- *Aspetta qui.* Wait here, I'll be back in a minute, he says and goes out.

I race out into the street without thinking.

An icy cold wind is blowing through the streets of the capital tonight, catching up dry leaves and scraps of paper and swirling them around me as I walk. The light from the street lamps is harsh, mercilessly dividing shadow from light. I am the only person out, apart from a solitary prowler creeping by in his car in search of excitement. As he comes abreast of me he slows in anticipation and winds down his window and calls in a low hungry voice, then speeds up when he catches a glimpse of my eyes.

The high-vaulted porticoes near the station are empty. I stand in the shadows invisible to the loiterers driving past in their cars. I wait for about half an hour, hoping against hope that one of the women will arrive, but no-one comes.

Either Sabrina has found a client for the night or has decided to stay indoors. I wonder briefly about her home. I imagine a small apartment, a warm kitchen with a pot on the



stove, Sabrina in slippers stirring, a television set talking and laughing endlessly to itself. A bright neon light over the kitchen table, a man dozing with his head on his arms, an empty flask of wine in front of him.

I turn my thoughts away from this vision of domesticity as a lame pigeon flutters up at my feet then settles back into the dust in a corner. I wait a few more minutes, reluctant to return to my room in the cheap hotel, but at last I begin to feel my toes ache with the cold and I turn back towards the station. It is just beginning to rain and the streets are black and oily, shining lividly in the light from the streetlamps traversed by the thin metal tramlines. I leap over a puddle, and as I look up I see a man step out of the shadows for an instant. There is something familiar about him, about the set of his shoulders. It is him. *Ispettore Lupo*. He looks at me in half-mocking recognition. I feel a rush of fear and race away. Shadowy white light, silvery streetlight sparkling on the tramlines, the last few black leaves hanging from the bare branches.

Breathless I let myself in through the small service door in the gateway to the *pensione* and ring the bell. There is no reply at first, but after a few minutes the concierge comes out buttoning his trousers and grumbling at the lateness. He lets me in, takes my document and payment for the night, and makes me sign the register. I feel his eyes on my legs as I wait for the rickety glass lift to arrive in its wrought iron cage.

I close the door of my room behind me and take off my coat. I am afraid to let my thoughts run anywhere. I wish I had some activity to keep myself busy, to keep my hands busy, my thoughts deadened. I know I am in danger of myself. I pull aside the faded net curtain and peer through the grimy window. I can make out the outlines of a blind service courtyard, covered in pigeon droppings. There is a broken nest on the windowsill with the remains of a dead chick caught up in the dry grass and sticks and bits of rubbish that the bird had chosen to build its nest. I quickly drop the curtain and return to the room. For a while I pace up and down trying to stave off the agitation I feel in my legs and arms, but aware of the absurdity of my movement at last I sit down. I rifle through my bag in the hope of finding something, anything, to distract my attention. I empty everything onto the chest of drawers. Keys, wallet, lipstick, tranquillisers. I check the bottle. Only four left. Not enough. Tissues. Penknife. Pen. Notebook. Address book. Ferry ticket. Nothing that will resolve anything. No passport.

The knife. I quickly take it to the window and drop it into the service courtyard. I hear it clatter on the cement below and then all is still once more. I return to the bed.

The room is bare. I clutch my body and hunch over, rocking backwards and forwards and keening under my breath. I lie down fully dressed on the bed and curl up and pull the grimy covers over my head. I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. Agitated; I am agitated tonight. I try to slow down my breathing, to deepen it into my lungs. I am cold and stiff, my shoulders and arms ache with tension as if I have been carrying heavy weights although I have carried nothing heavier all day than my handbag. Gradually my breathing slows. I pull my head free of the covers. Nothing has changed. The room is still here in all its dreariness and squalor. I reach out my hand and switch off the light.

In the dark all the sounds are suddenly amplified. I can hear plumbing gurgling in the walls. I hear a clock ticking somewhere in a room below me. From far off I can hear the siren of an ambulance howl across the empty streets of the city. I follow it in my mind's eye, recognizing the streets, the buildings it passes, until I see it turn in at *Regina Coeli* hospital. Then silence except for the clock. I hear, down at the bottom of the stairwell, the muffled sound of a door closing. Then footsteps, slow, uncertain on the stairs, the drag of an arm using the wall for guidance. Whoever it is has not switched on the light and is feeling his way up in the dark.

I know it is him.

The footsteps grow closer. Now I can hear him breathing too, slightly out of breath from the two flights of stairs, heavy breath, a big man, not too fit, middle-aged. I search the air for his scent. Nothing, just dust; no, wait, a vague smell of stale sweat, growing stronger now, a metallic smell of city transport, of money changing hands, of hands clutching tram straps, of old cigarette smoke. The sounds stop, he is here, outside, he has discovered my door. I hold my breath. My senses are all ajangle, nerve endings almost painfully alert, overstimulated. I wait. I know he is trying to find me, sniff me out, is waiting to catch a trace of me. Aah, there, he has it. In the dark and silence and airlessness only taste and smell can betray me. My animal scent. I hear him breathe in deeply. I am discovered. I release my breath. It is no use hiding any longer.

From where I lie, I stretch out my hand, unlock the door of my room and push the door ajar.

I have let it begin. I have turned the key in the lock. Oh dark, dark, dark. Slipping into the infinite confusion of my mind. I lie back again and close my eyes tight. The only sound I can hear is the pounding of the blood in my ears and head. I wait without daring to move. Slowly the pounding subsides.

He moves again, his hand touches the door gently, then grips it, finds it ajar, pulls it open.

I lie and wait. The sheets are rough and hard against my cheek. He feels his way to the edge of the bed. His scent is overwhelming now, filling the room, his breath catches in his throat. He pushes the door shut with his shoulder. Now it is just him and me in this tight space, so close I can hardly breathe, yet still I don't move, still I lie and wait.

He sits on the edge of the bed. For a moment he is still, finding his bearings in the dark, he coughs, clears his throat then coughs again. He turns to me, reaches out his hand and touches my arm. He feels his way to the bedside light, switches it on, orientates himself in the room and realises that there is nowhere to sit apart from the bed, then switches it off again. He sits on the edge of the bed. For a moment he is still, finding his bearings in the dark, he coughs, then coughs again. He turns to me, reaches out his hand and touches my arm. He grunts, then stretches out beside me on the bed, pulls out a packet of cigarettes and puts one between his lips. He breathes heavily. A match flares in the darkness. The flame glints off his pale face then dies and the darkness returns. I catch a glimpse of heavy stubble, wide pores. He inhales deeply, and the air fills with the cloying smell of smoke. He sighs then turns to me.

- *Mi dispiace che e' scappata prima?* I'm sorry you ran out this afternoon. I've been looking for you everywhere.

I can't move. I lie there still, barely breathing. Having opened the door I have spent my last energy.

Wordlessly, with certainty and clarity of movement, he pushes up my cardigan and fumbles and gropes at my chest, then his hands drop, hard, penetrating, the thick hairy fingers pull and push and enter. He withdraws, and lies back on the pillow breathing hard.

- *Ti piacciono le donne, eh?* You like women?

*Ti faccio vedere cos'e' un vero uomo.*

- *E il bambino?* And the child? You didn't tell me about that.

- *Puttana.*

I hear the sound of a zipper opening, the rustle of clothes and now he is on me, I feel his weight, I feel the loose springs of the bed beneath me, I feel his hardness tearing at me, in me, the rhythmical movement begins again as it has before. I open my eyes.

In the gloom I can see the side of his head beside mine, the large ear, large with hairs sprouting from the centre. There is something about this ear that feels unbearable, that fills me with outrage.

I reach out to the little table beside the bed, unsure of what I am seeking. My hand touches, discards, touches again, at last finds what I am looking for. I run my fingers over its surface, touching, touching, like a tongue touching, touching ever so gently, the bloodied place where a tooth has come out. I brace the muscles of my forearm, then my belly as I test the weight.

Heavy.

I lie, uncertain, in the half dark, the orange light reflected from the city sky through the grimy window. I turn my head, once more see the side of his head, the fleshy ear, the hairy sprouts, and all my nausea and rage rise in me like bile. My hands feel the heavy marble ashtray, in the dark I lift it. In my mind's eye I hold the door handle with the other hand. He thinks he has me there in that flaccid humid embrace. But I am there, firm cool-bodied, upright, ready to run.

I pick up the ashtray, I feel the weight in my arm and back and belly. I hold it high above my head and then smash it down onto his head, again and again, like beating a carpet. I feel flesh open wide, fragments of bone separate, embed themselves in the grey flower-like whorls of his brain. He rises, half-rises on his forearms, a prehistoric monster trying to free itself from the mud, the ooze, where its heavy body is trapped. He bellows, then collapses back into suffocation and drowning and death.

But after a while he begins to stir again, and then suddenly he is awake, in the dark I hear him chuckle. Still not dead.

He rolls off me and starts talking, but his thoughts are confused, the speech long and rambling, and I watch the glow of his cigarette in the dark, and sometimes he dozes off in mid sentence so that I begin to relax but then he starts talking again. And now his speech is slurred so that I can hardly understand what he is saying. At last he falls silent. And as the first cold light of dawn fingers its way through the threadbare curtains into the smoky room, he just lies there, inert.

I hear the landlady move in preparation for the day in the rooms below me.

Towards dawn, as the first light fingers its way through the dirty curtains, I get up, wash quickly in the washbasin, straighten my clothes and leave the room, not glancing even once at the bed. I retrieve my identity card from the concierge's desk where it lies in the same place I had left it last night and slip out into the drizzle of the street. The grey light of early morning touches the grey buildings. Someone has strewn breadcrumbs onto the pavement and dirty pigeons peck listlessly at them. Early commuters wait grey-faced at a bus-stop, huddled in thick jackets and hats. A few puff raggedly at the first cigarette of the day, anxious to finish it before the bus arrives.

I wait with them, indifferent, transitioning now. I have no umbrella and my hair grows lank and untidy in the drizzle. At last the bus arrives and I am pushed on board with everyone else. I clasp the strap above my head and allow myself to be rocked gently against the mass of other damp steaming wool-coated bodies packed in around me. I feel a sense of panic at the closeness, as if I can't breathe. I expect the intrusive hand at any minute, I think I am going to faint. At the first stop I manage to push my way to the door, shouting *permesso, permesso*, or it seems to me that I am shouting but all that comes out is a whisper. Surprisingly the human mass parts and I descend onto the street. I find a bench at a bus shelter and sit, feeling lost inside, feeling unable to be touched, distant, unreal. After a while I get up and walk on, unsettled, and make my way back to the little harbour where the ferries leave for the island.

It is a grey day and drizzling as the *aliscafo* speeds across the smooth waters of the bay. Everything is depressed, even the waves have no energy, just a slow underwater swell, the surface flat and opaque and drops of water cling to every surface of the boat. I recognize a few of the faces about me but manage to isolate myself behind my book after a few perfunctory greetings. I go straight to school from the port and by nine o' clock I am in class. It is raining here too, a monotonous drizzle. The seagulls have come ashore and are standing along the harbour wall in a row, all facing the same direction. Even they, creatures of the waters, do not like this all-round wetness. I tell the children to write a composition. The title is 'Rain'. I know I will have to mark it later, or perhaps I won't, but it is better than trying to communicate. I am not sure I would be able to do that today. I sit at my desk with the register open in front of me, pretending, no, not pretending anything, just sitting.

There are shadows moving in my head and I find it difficult to focus my eyes on the small squares on the pages in front of me. They make no sense; at times they seem intense and dark coloured, at others they shift far off. I can't quite see the faces of the children either, or remember their names. They look familiar, like the faces of people I have known in my childhood but can no longer place. But I know they are making too much noise and that the principal might come and reprimand us and tell us to keep quiet.

I hold Ugo back at the end of the lesson and, when the other children have left, tell him I need to go away. He looks at me with big eyes.

- *Ma poi torni, vero?*

- Yes, but not for a long time.

- *Ma devi andare subito?*

- Yes, I must leave today.

He hangs his head and rocks from foot to foot.

- *Posso venire con te?*

I can't bear it. My heart leaps. I nod. I tell him to come to my apartment after lunch and to be ready. I tell him not to say a word to anyone.

After school I go back home. It feels strange to open the door of my apartment again, to recognize faint smells I did not even know were there but that belong inseparably to these walls and stairs, smells of mould, of ancient sewers, of the bleach that is used to disinfect the stairs.

My apartment is dry and dusty and a bitter cold seems to rise from the floor and walls. I wonder if I should light the kerosene heater, but it seems pointless to warm the room if I am going out again at once. The air is stale and cold. I throw open the shutters and a grey light enters the room. I touch the sheets on my bed and they are damp and clammy under my fingers. It feels strange to me, this room, like a place I don't know, even though I have lived between these four walls for the past twenty years. The paintings, the eyes, glare down at me. I go into the bathroom and lift my eyes to the image in the mirror. I do not recognise the face I see there.

I lie down, fully dressed, on my bed. There is not much to do. It is strange that after twenty years I can just walk out and feel no connection to anything. Apart from the paintings. I feel as if I am waiting for something to happen, but nothing does and I can't work out what it would be anyway, and eventually I fall asleep.

Then Ugo comes and I am woken by his gentle tapping on the door.

- *Che facciamo dell'uccellino? Può venire anche lei?*

- The bird can't come with us. We will have to set it free.

We go up the hill together, hand in hand, Ugo carrying the cage. When we reach the grove in the botanical gardens near the cemetery, the most protected spot on the whole island, he puts it carefully onto the ground and opens the cage door. The little bird ignores the open door, perhaps even unaware that another possible world exists outside the bars. Perhaps it has never occurred to her that she could live outside. Perhaps the bars are so much part of her world that she has no concept of sea or sky without the criss-crossing metal lines of the cage that cast shadows across her body that move with the movements of the sun and moon. I put my hand inside and catch her in my fingers. Her body is soft and warm and I can feel her heart beating against my skin. I carefully draw out my hand and bring her to my face, wanting to bless her before she goes, then I pass her to the child. He nuzzles her against his cheek for a moment, then, holding my hand tightly he opens his fingers. She flutters to the ground and sits, bewildered, uncertain what to do. We wait for her to fly away or do something, do anything, but she just crouches there motionless. I bend down and nudge her with my fingers and at last, frightened, she flutters off into the bushes. Ugo sprinkles all the remaining bird seed around on the ground, and then we turn and, still hand in hand, make our way back down the hill to the village.

We go back to my room to prepare for our departure.

We take down all the paintings one by one and make a pile of them on the floor. Holding his hand I pick up the petrol can. I tip it up, and in the dark we smell the oily thinness fill the air. I trail a thread of petrol over the paintings. I look at Ugo. He looks back at me. I pick up the box of matches. There is fear in his eyes but I sense no hesitation. I extract a match and strike it. A little flame flares up, glows blue and gold in the dark. I toss it onto the carpet, and, holding Ugo by the hand, we walk down the stairs and out of the door.

The ferry is about to depart. We take our seats in silence and sit, hands crossed, as the engine starts up and the boat pulls out of the harbor. A thin pall of smoke rises from the village, and we turn our heads away and look across the sea to the mainland.

## Book 3

### The Present of Things Future

You must give birth to your images.  
They are the future waiting to be born.  
Fear not the strangeness you feel  
The future must enter into you long before it happens...  
Just wait for the birth, for the hour of new clarity.

Rilke

You can get lost in Tuscany without a map. Unlike the geometric grid of a South African landscape, where streets and roads cut straight across the countryside, here they meander and turn back on themselves, and hesitate, passing by villages with strangely evocative names like *Orgia* and *Saturnia*, until you have no idea where you are going, nor know where is north or south, and barely can distinguish up from down. You feel disoriented. Lakes pass by on your left and disappear and a few minutes later reappear on your right. The roads wind steeply upwards around hairpin bends through woods of chestnut trees where wild boars and wolves have returned after half a century of absence.

It was the middle of winter when you left, *i giorni della merla*, the blackbird days as they call the bitterest, darkest days at the end of January. You found a bus, a *corriere*, to take you northwards, to *Pitigliano*, and then another on from there. You didn't bother to ask what its destination was.

You didn't talk, you and the boy. You bought two tickets, one for him and one for you, and you sat side by side on the hard seats looking out. You passed through the industrial outskirts of the city, and carried on past the lake of Bracciano under colourless skies with the smell of bonfires burning dead leaves and branches acrid in your nostrils. You don't know about him but you didn't see anything. The scenery passed in a blur. You were only aware of his small solid presence beside you on the bench.

First fallow wheat fields straggled along next to the road, interspersed with olive trees and vineyards that broke up as you began to rise into the hills and the woods closed in around you. The driver turned on the windscreen wipers as heavy raindrops began to splash themselves across the windows of the bus. The wipers seemed ridiculously small and only



cleared a tiny section of the front window. The drops steamed on the hot tarmac and the windows soon misted up with the dampness so that shapes outside grew strange and contorted but neither of you tried to clear the mist from the glass. It reflected what was inside you - misty, dark, obscure. At last you reached the final stop and you alighted. It was still raining lightly, but the clouds appeared to be clearing in the west. You watched as the bus turned heavily in the little square, took on board its new passengers for the return trip, and with a honking of its horn and a cloud of exhaust fumes, disappeared down the valley. There was a bar with a few tables stacked outside and a faded poster advertising *Algida* ice creams, but the door was locked and rotting leaves piled high against it. It clearly hadn't been opened since the summer. Even the church was locked. You and the boy stood there. There was no-one else around. You read the name of the village on the tattered bus timetable stuck on the notice board outside the bar - *Serra*. The fortress.

You wandered through the fortified village and stood for a moment high on the ramparts looking out over the forests, the valleys and gorges that reached to the horizon. It felt as if you were on the prow of a ship about to set sail into an ocean of brown leaves and spidery branches. You gazed out to the western horizon, where the sun was setting through black clouds. And then you lowered yourselves over the wall and dropped below the surface along a narrow path that wound its way downwards, you knew not where.

For days you walked through deep forests. Chestnut and plane and oak trees, deciduous trees, shady and soft, became your home. You shared this world with other shy silent creatures, foxes, ferrets, squirrels. One day a vixen accompanied you, curious, for several hours, trotting along parallel to you but a few arm's lengths away, stopping when you stopped, watching what you watched. Sometimes at night you heard snorting and rustling in the undergrowth, but the animals kept their distance, and all you encountered was their feral smell in the path, or spoor in the mud. Once at night you caught sight of yellow eyes staring at you and you knew it was a wolf. You froze and after a few minutes the lights went out and they disappeared. You did not tell Ugo for fear of frightening him, but you did not forget those eyes.

- Hurry, hurry, you said to him. We mustn't let anyone see us.

How long could you keep going? They were looking for you, you knew. You saw the newspaper headlines outside an *edicola* as you passed through a sleeping village by night. You saw your photographs side by side on the billboard, yours from your *permesso di*

*soggiorno*, younger but recognizable by the deep haunted eyes, Ugo's school photo taken a few years ago when he was much younger. No one had loved him enough to want to take or keep pictures of him more recently.

You fled from field to field, eating what you could, escaping, avoiding farmhouses and villages. A turnip here, tomatoes there, crusts of bread left out for the cats on another. You filled your pockets with ears of corn on one farm, where the farmer was unwise enough to plant his crop far from the watchful ears of his dogs. You gathered the last of the chestnuts which you roasted over the fire at night on sticks, and mushrooms and the few remaining blackberries and blueberries, and when there was nothing else you sucked on stalks of wild sorrel or long stems of grass which you found in the occasional clearings between the trees. After a few days you were both very lean and your arms and legs scratched and bruised.

When you came to a small hamlet, often abandoned, the pickings were more abundant – fruit off trees gone wild, vegetables gone to seed - and there was no danger of being caught. You sometimes slept overnight in one of the tumbled-down houses, but you were anxious about vipers and spiders, and the sense of despair and futility and loss in these places where once families had lived and prospered made you want to move on, to travel forward. You did not know where you were going, except that you must move forward.

And one day you came to the sea, to a long white strand with long white waves that mimed and echoed its forms. The child and you traced lines on the sand with your fingers and played noughts and crosses. He beat you every time and laughed uproariously when he did. He asked you to draw him a picture and you made a face with eyes but he didn't like that. He told you to draw him a dog and clapped his hands to see it. He asked you what its name was.

- Manfred, you said, it's Manfred.

- Tell me about Manfred? he asked, but you couldn't remember any stories to tell him and your mind just went blank each time you tried.

They were light-hearted days when you were still relieved at your escape, unconcerned about the future. You told each other stories as you walked, and sang songs and skipped stones off the sea. At night you gathered driftwood and made a little fire, and you hollowed out a soft shallow grave in the sand and lay down and sang lullabies until you fell asleep, and the stars above watched over you.

You came to a place where the cliffs rose up high and fell in a tumble of rocks into the sea, and you were forced inland if you wanted to continue. And it began to rain. The soft hushing sound of the rain, calling, inducing sleep, drowsiness, numbness in the brain, softening edges, smoothing, penetrating after so many days of enervating wind, of dryness and cracked, salty surfaces.

The shadow of an abbey fell across your path, with high solemn walls, an empty rose window above the altar, and no roof. The lead tiles that covered the nave had been used to make cannon balls for some war of dominion or other, perhaps the Napoleonic campaigns, perhaps something earlier, their significance long forgotten. The softness of the past. The layers of history that hold us, that comfort us from the terror of nothingness.

You stretched out on your backs on the grassy floor in front of the stone altar and gazed up at the night sky. You opened your arms wide on either side. Above you the universe was captured in the shape of a cross. Deep blue studded with sparkles of gold. Glowing, trembling with life, red stars, yellow, white, they sparkled in the cold brilliance of the night. You watched, transfixed, a star shoot across the heavens from wall to wall. You half expected it to bounce off the far wall and ricochet backwards and forwards, ever downwards until it lay, vibrating, pulsating, gleaming on the tiny white flowers and grass that carpeted the floor of the abbey.

You came out at last, out of the low hills and valleys of the *Maremma*, forest covered, with its steaming stinking sulphur springs, and radioactive mountains full of lead, and into the sloping wheatlands, the slow circles and bends woven by the plough over thousands of years.

Meaning through memory. Meaninglessness through forgetting. Where memory is held, is prized, is cherished, where the past is studied and revered, where history is in the bones of everything, where everything is named.

You sat on the edge of a lake, was it *Bracciano*, or *Pitigliano*, or even *Trasimeno* or *Garda*, and remembered the dry lakes of your childhood, the lakes of dust where there was no water. A borehole, a windmill, metal structure penetrating deep into the earth to tap into an underground stream, remnant of the waterways that once crisscrossed the plain. A bird soared overhead. The dull, monotonous clanking of the borehole turned by the wind pulling up sullen brown brak water to the surface, unpleasant and salty to the taste, on the tongue;

you had to be very thirsty to drink it, but one was always thirsty there. You remembered the place of your childhood, depleted, dry, barren.

A falconer stood at the edge of an open field, a bird on his gloved hand, hooded, like something out of a hieroglyph.

He waited.

The moment must be right. Then he slipped the hood off the bird's head.

Slow yellow eyes blinked, then blinked again, black pupils explored the sky. As if in slow motion the wings opened and the claws released their grip and the body rose into the air, heavily at first. The wings thrust down hard against the pull, the suck of the earth, and then it was away, soaring high above the trees.

The falconer let it run, knowing that to try and call it in at this point would be fatal; the bird's will would be pitted against his and it would escape, probably for ever. He had to bide his time, allow it to stretch, allow it to sense freedom. Its own anxiety, not his, would bring it running back to check that he was still there.

When the falconer saw it return hurtling like an arrow towards him, he whistled *pwee* and gestured with his arm, and the bird wheeled and flew away again, but not so far this time. So when his shrill whistle came again *pwee pwee* the creature allowed itself to accompany him, to second him, to will what he willed, and it began to circle the field, at a distance first, far beyond the trees that bordered it, then the circles grew slowly tighter, smaller, the bird's head turning from side to side, its eyes watching the man on the ground, intrigued, held in his spell, not dominated but enthralled by him. At last the man pulled a dove from his bag, a dove half stunned, barely struggling, and showed it to the falcon, held it aloft, high in the air on his hand. The falcon slowed, circling lower now, closer, watching carefully, turning its head from side to side to gauge its prey. The falconer held up the dove, and then launched it high into the air.

With a smack the falcon dived and grabbed it in midair with its talons then soared up to the clouds, up to the heavens, in triumph, flying fast, winging swiftly up, up, escape, and freedom so close. And then the whistle broke into its reverie, *pwee*, and again and again, *pwee, pwee, pwee*. The falcon could smell the blood, it could sense the warm flesh close to its own. The yellow eyes half closed for a moment, then the master's will took hold. The bird circled the field once more, and then descended and landed on his wrist and cast the dove

at his feet. *Ptui*. It spat a few stray feathers from its beak, and then looked around shivering with wild eyes.

The man took the hood from his pocket and covered the bird's head affectionately, stroking the bony skull through the suede with the soft cushion of his thumb. He clipped the chain back onto the ring around the legs, then fed the falcon a piece of meat from his pocket. Not the quarry, not the prey. That was for him alone, the master. The bird had to learn to subdue its will to him. The man could make no mistakes in this game of domination and submission.

You stood in the shade of the trees, with the boy bedside you, watching. When he had finished you pulled back against the trunk and waited until he had disappeared into his battered car and chained the bird to a bar in the back of the vehicle. When he had driven away and over the crest of the hill in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes you set off again across the field and into the woods.

At last you stop. You hadn't planned it that way, but there is no other choice. Ugo hurt himself this morning and can no longer walk.

You knew these abandoned houses were dangerous. The floor collapsed under his weight and he plummeted into the cellar, cutting his thigh open on a metal spike, a deep, jagged gash. You try to clean it as best you can, with water from an outside cistern, but you have no bandages or disinfectant. You find a bottle of wine in a store room and a demijohn of oil. You pour some of the wine onto the wound but you don't think it will do anything. He does not even wince when it touches him. You tear off the sleeve of your blouse and bind that around his leg.

You are not sure whether he has just sprained his ankle or broken the bone. It seems to sit at a strange angle, but maybe he is just holding it like that because of the pain. He says he can't walk any further.

You tell him he must get up. You pull him up and hold him under the arms for support, but he cries every time his foot touches the ground. You don't know what to do. You pace up and down in despair.

But at last you are forced to give in and let him lie down again. You sit next to him for a while, but you keep thinking of dogs, of fierce dogs with snuffling noses, seeking, searching

for you along the forest floor, tails wagging from side to side. But you know you will have to stop. You know you can't go any further.

It is a tiny hamlet, just a cluster of houses surrounded by a high stone wall hidden in amongst the trees. It looks as if it must have been abandoned decades ago, perhaps just after the war when so many people moved to the cities in search of work, and now nature has taken over. Weeds grow everywhere in wild abandon. Fig trees have sprouted and grown in cracks in walls, nettles collected below, pushing aside the bricks and stones until the wall falls at last and the house collapses. Roots buckle the cobbled alleys. You wander from house to house. Bats and pigeons have nested here over the years leaving mounds of excrement and sticks and feathers and broken shells and bones piled high and smelly on the worn faded linoleum-covered floors.

There is a small square in the middle of the hamlet, an open space where the houses open out into a tiny piazza with a little chapel at one end and a boarded-up shop at the other. You imagine people sitting out here on a summer's night, talking and laughing and singing. It makes you feel very sad.

The main house looking onto the square is well-proportioned, and is, like the others, built of grey river stones, but at one time it had been plastered and painted a warm ochre colour. It has withstood the assaults of nature better than the others. The rooms are dry and relatively clean.

The well in the square has a carved stone base depicting animals and flying birds around the rim. You drop in a stone and hear a clear plop as it hits the water. You put your head in and shout and the well shouts back again and again echoing your thin birdlike cry.

Pigeons roost on the wooden rafters of the little chapel or perch drunkenly on the faded triptych above the rotting altar. The roof has caved in, collapsed in one corner. Graffiti covers the walls, and the remains of a pew is charred by the bonfire lit by vagrants passing through; they have also defecated in the corners. There are the half-visible remains of frescoes on the wall, eroded, eaten away by damp and mould. Rain has almost washed the colours off two walls most exposed to the weather, but the paintings are still visible on the more protected walls. You can just make out the faded outlines of some figures, barely human any longer. You can make out bodies, figures falling, but you know you will need to clean them up and find a light to see them properly. Lush weeds grow in the portico. You

grab hold of one and pull it up by its roots. It gives you great pleasure to do so. It feels like coming home.

You have decided you will stay here for a while. Even if he weren't hurt you need somewhere to take refuge. Here you can sleep in front of the fire for as long as you like. You collect some firewood and light a fire in the huge fireplace in the kitchen. Upstairs you find an old mouldy mattress. You empty out the damp feathers and fill it with dry leaves and put it in front of the hearth where Ugo can lie down. You struggle to open the shutters and they give way at last and the golden sunlight pours in. You lean out. From where you stand you can see out over the tops of the trees. You can hear church bells rising through the clear air from far away. You can see the sprawl of Florence far off below you in a brownish haze, and at its heart Giotto's bell tower. There seem to be no other villages nearby but you are aware that curious woodcutters or shepherds might notice smoke coming from the chimney and might come to see what is going on. But they would probably think it was just a vagrant who was passing through and wouldn't bother to check. Or so you hope.

And in the night you hear footsteps, and the sound of someone coughing – it sounds like a man. You and the child hold each other tight in the dark. And in the morning he is sitting in the square when you get up, with his back against the wall, warming himself in the sun. He looks at you blankly when you try to speak to him. You ask him if he would like some water. He smiles but doesn't say a word. Perhaps he is mute? He seems to see things that are not there and hears voices that only he can hear. He seems to understand when you speak to him in Italian, but he gets very confused and is unable to do what you ask him.

When the sun is high he gets up and sets to work pruning the olive trees below the houses. He goes about the task with an easy rhythmic motion, as of something he had learned as a child. In the afternoon he returns and beckons you and Ugo to come to his house at the far end of the hamlet. Always in gestures. You follow him there. A woman stands framed by firelight in the doorway.

- Come inside, she says, your place is waiting.

You were taken in by Antonio and his sister Elisabetta, in their old house in the abandoned hamlet on the hill above the city walls, up the valley of the *Torba*, near to its confluence with the *Branca*, which flows down the hill through vineyards and olive groves to the plain. They took you in without any questions.

You went in and sat by the fire. The woman brought you a bowl of warm scented water, round and whole, and a soft towel, and indicated that you should wash. She placed it on the ledge beside you. You plunged your hands in and splashed your face, feeling the dust and grime wash away. In the meantime she prepared a bath for you in the next room which was filled with steam. You let yourself slip under the water, brushing the tangles out of your hair, washing your scratched aching body. The water felt soft and comforting. You almost fell asleep in the bath, but managed to rouse yourself at the last moment and step out of the large tub. You wrapped yourself in the rough towel that lay ready for you on the chair, and combed out your hair in front of the fireplace. You felt reluctant to put on your dirty old clothes again, so you slipped into the homespun linen robe that had been laid out on the bed. You opened the door and the woman was there waiting for you; she took your hand and led you back to the kitchen and showed you to the table. You sat and she dished up steaming hot yellow polenta which Antonio cut with a piece of string. She laughed to see how hungry you were, and refilled your plate when you were finished. Ugo was smiling and seemed comfortable in a way you had never seen before.

After dinner the woman sat beside the fire and sang songs that were strange and yet familiar at the same time. You listened to her singing and soon you realised you knew the songs and you joined in and sang with her, soft, sad songs of loss and grieving, and Ugo sang too.

At first you slept all day every day. Elisabetta tended to your needs and those of the boy, dressing his wound until it healed, so that each time you awoke she would be moving quietly about the room. You found you did not have the strength to rise from your bed, nor did you have the energy even to question why.

But you woke up one morning and the sun was shining through the deep set windows of your room, and she called you to get up and sit by the fire. And you sat there with her shelling peas and listening to the sparrows chirping in the eaves.

And each day you grew a little stronger.

You went out with Antonio this morning. There was still frost on the ground and the *buozzo* was frozen over. He was pruning the olive trees in preparation for the new growth. Antonio did the work, you and the child walked behind raking up the cut branches into little mounds which you set alight and left to smoulder in the crisp windless air. The smell of



burning wood surrounded you as the small columns of smoke rose straight into the pale sky. You bent and straightened, feeling the muscles in your thighs and belly tighten and grow strong. The sun was barely strong enough to warm you, but the exercise released heat into your own body so that soon you were sweating. You felt a freedom and contentment you had not known for many years. When it was midmorning he shared his bread and olives with you and you sat on a log and looked out over the valley. All about there were little bonfires burning like yours. He traced out the limits of his land with a dirty finger, from the acacia on this side to the oak tree on the other. It had belonged to him and his family for many generations. He knew every tree and tussock intimately. He showed you where a fox had sunned itself early this morning on the path, miming its movements. And now you were back at work, working in tandem, tending to the exuberance of nature.

You looked out this morning and saw the young wheat springing up all around you, the first red poppies starting to flower, dancing on the ends of their long green stalks. You saw the first swallows of summer darting overhead, chasing invisible insects with shrill cries. You heard the low distant drone of a tractor and two men working on the far edge of a field, their attention completely focused on the task at hand.

There is an idea that has slowly been forming in your mind over these months in which your body has been idle. You would like to restore the paintings in the little chapel at the far end of the piazza. Antonio shows you a box of dyes and pigments that he has found in one of the abandoned houses and you set to work.

You have been here now for a year – you know because it is chestnut season again. You have made flour out of the chestnuts, and then *castagnaccia*, mixing the sweet brown flour with water and olive oil and then baking it in the wood ovens in large flat round trays. The year has gone around and now it is back to this. Back to the chestnuts, back to the *castagnaccia*. Antonio brings in loads of chestnuts and some you eat at once roasted in the fire and the others his sister puts out in the courtyard to dry in the late autumn sun, and then grinds to make flour. She has a kind of small mill off the kitchen.

The boy has grown tall in these months. He laughs often and helps Antonio with his work in the fields. You sometimes hear him whistling outside your window to imitate the birds of the woods as he works.

The leaves are falling in the woods behind the house. Golden red and brown they drift motionless in the still air, then spiral slowly down. There is a golden haze through the branches. Scent of mushrooms and myrtle. Sometimes you sit down where the rivers meet, the water eddies around as it rushes towards the sea. The seagulls, calling plaintively, come inland before a storm to take refuge away from the tempest.

When the winter is done it will be time for you to go. You have finished restoring the paintings. At Easter you will light the candles and allow them all in. The priest will come and say mass in the little chapel. And when they have all gone you will pull on your coat and boots.

And you will open the door and slip out alone into the night.

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